No. 254 / APRIL 1994

THE NI
NEW INTERNATIONALIST

Death without weeping

Daily life in Northeast Brazil

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coming next MONTH

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- **Fortress Ulster** – borders within Europe may be coming down but that between the two Irelands is more fortified than ever, as local people know to their cost
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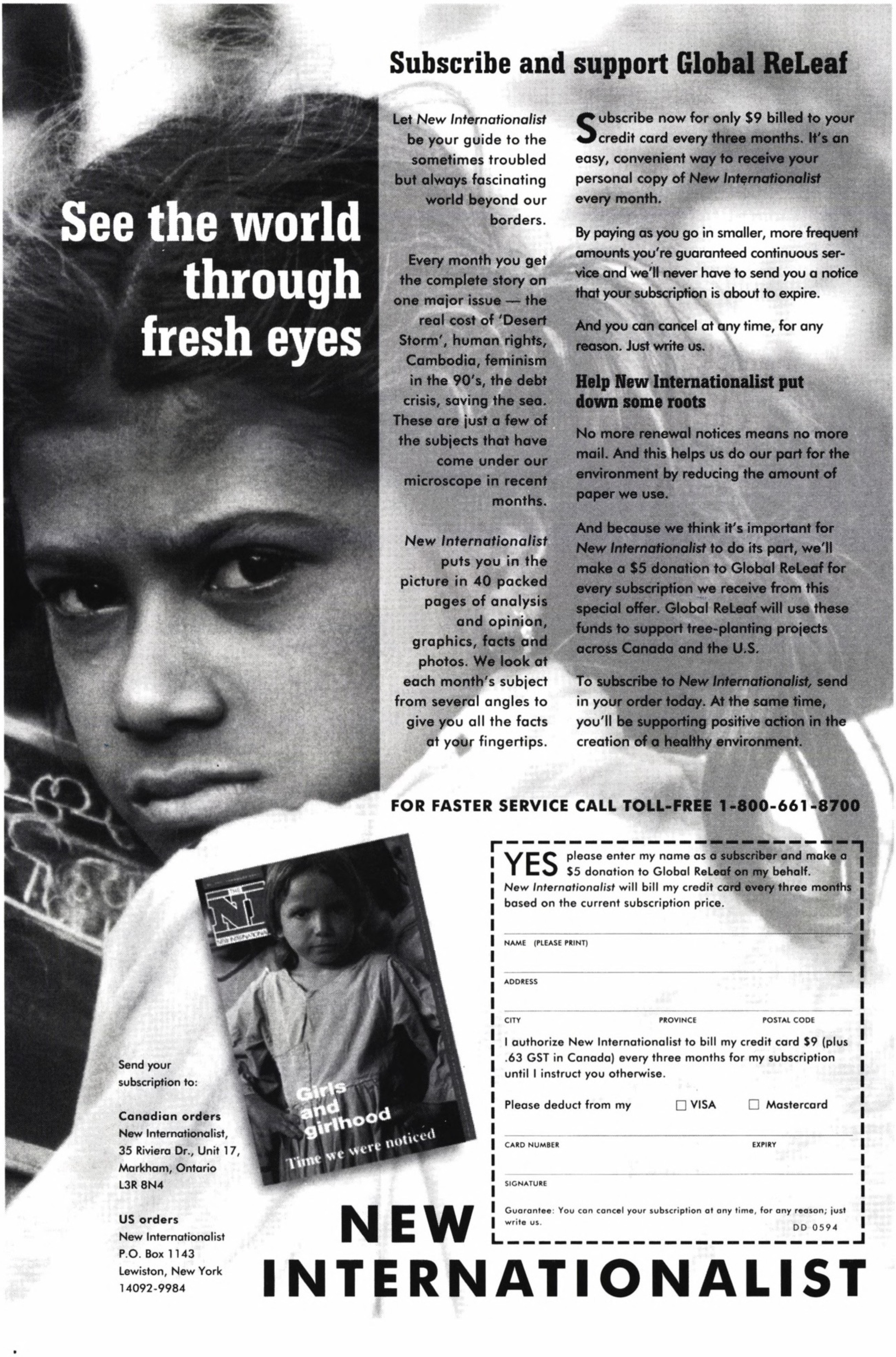

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CONTENTS

PHOTOS THROUGHOUT BY NANCY SCHEPER-HUGHES UNLESS OTHERWISE STATED

Foot of the factory, foot of the cane 4

*Introducing her story, **Nancy Scheper-Hughes** describes how her own life was linked in her imagination to Northeast Brazil from early childhood.*

Bom Jesus 6

*The town, the shantytown and their history, visualized by **Brick**.*

Brief lives, sudden sadness 8

Lordes, the first of the sisters at the center of the story, has lost more children than have survived.

Mother love 11

If all love is difficult and dangerous, it is especially so for mothers who bring their infants into a world of scarcity and foreboding.

Biu on the roller coaster 15

How her life ran off the rails.

INFANT MORTALITY – THE FACTS 18

Carnival and forgetting 20

Animated festivities uncover deep divisions of wealth, race and gender.

Simply – the story of sugar in Northeast Brazil 22

The spirit-child 24

How Mercea died while Biu, her mother, was out 'playing' Carnival.

The cleansing fire 25

The people of the shantytown have few illusions, but they celebrate existence and keep faith.

Speaking truth to power 27

*Concluding her story, **Nancy Scheper-Hughes** explains why she likes to think of herself as a clerk of the records.*

Letters 2
Letter from Lagos 3
Updates 29
Reviews: plus **Terry Gilliam** classic 32
Curiosities 34
Endpiece: by **Eduardo Galeano** 35
Country profile: Singapore 36

FRONT COVER PHOTOGRAPH BY **NANCY SCHEPER-HUGHES**: BIU, THE MIDDLE OF THE THREE SISTERS, USED TO SMOKE A PIPE, BUT HAS GONE 'UNDERGROUND' WITH IT.
MAGAZINE DESIGNED BY **CLIVE OFFLEY**.

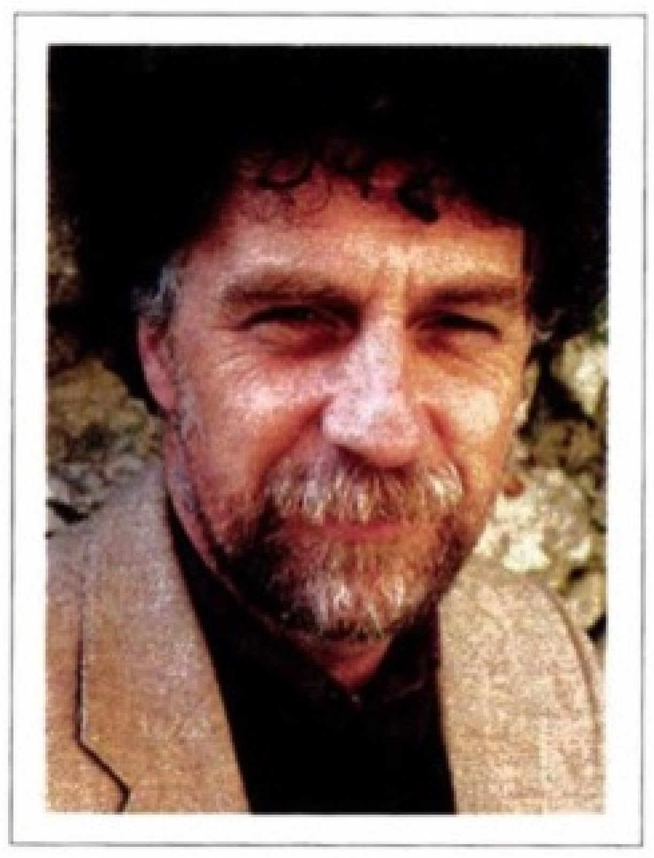
THIS MONTH'S **THEME**

Death without **weeping**

FROM THIS MONTH'S **EDITOR**

If you're a stalwart reader of the **NI** (is there any other kind?) you'll have noticed that from time to time we open up a whole issue of the magazine to a single writer. Most often it's one of our own editors who is encouraged to indulge his or her writerly ambitions at greater length than usual. But there are occasions when we turn over a complete issue to an outside contributor, someone whose work is particularly arresting or whose analysis is especially lucid.

That's the case this month when we feature the work of California-based anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes. If the name is familiar it's because we've published several articles by her over the past few years. Her book *Death Without Weeping,* on which this magazine is based, originally appeared in 1992. The sprawling, 600-page hardcover is both an empirical study and an intimate portrait of the lives of women and children in the Brazilian shantytown she calls *Alto do Cruzeiro.*



Shortly after it was published one of my fellow editors, David Ransom, began thinking about how to turn it into an issue of the **NI.** First he set out to convince the rest of us – not too hard a task since most of us were already keen on her work. Next we contacted Nancy, then her publisher (the University of California Press), and both were keen to go ahead. At this point the issue was slotted into our planning schedule and we began to think about who would do the editing work.

As the publication date crept closer I confidently volunteered to take on the main editorial task of reducing the weighty tome to 20 slim pages of text. Just another editing task, I thought. Well, not quite. The challenge was daunting: how to do justice to the scope of the original? After immersing myself in the text for a few weeks I emerged content to try to capture the mood of Nancy's study and to summarize the key arguments. I think you'll find it a compelling read which reveals the complexity and richness of her research.

The more familiar I became with *Death Without Weeping* the more I was struck by Nancy's ability to merge her academic interests with a strong, gut-level humanitarianism. As we read we gain not only knowledge but empathy and admiration for the people who appear as complex characters in her work. And we begin to understand how the shantytown dwellers survive and express themselves in an unjust, oppressive system that seeks to keep them silent.

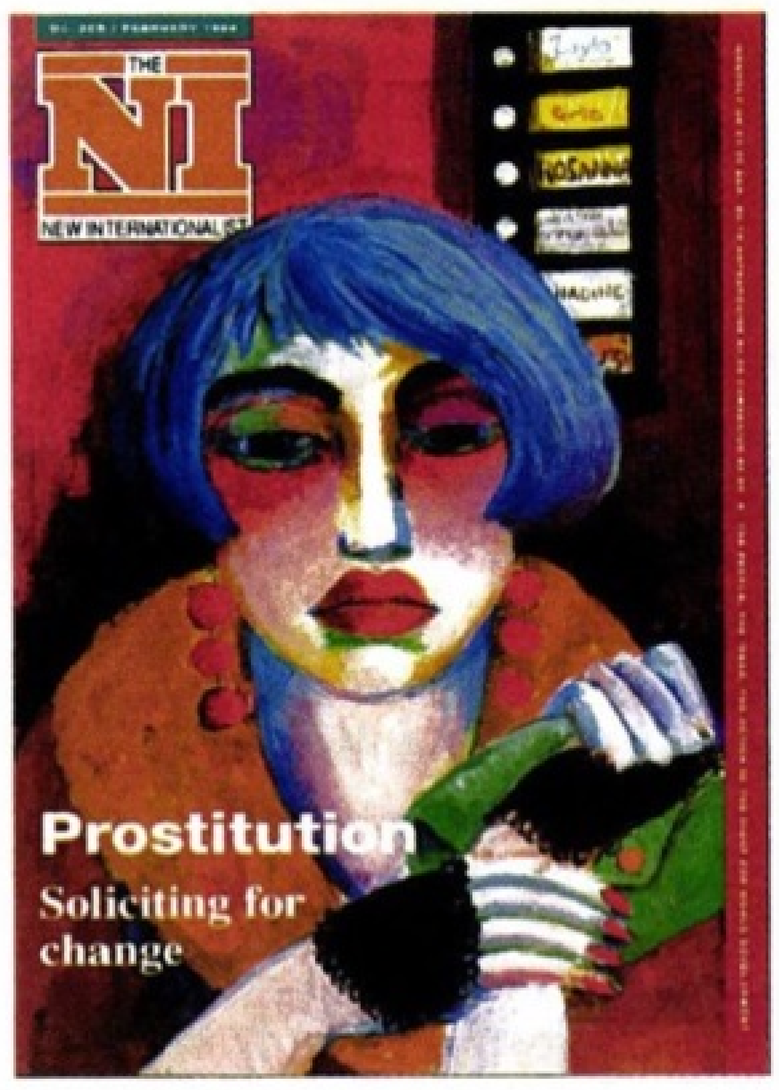
My job was made easier by Nancy's refreshingly 'un-academic' attachment to her work. Many scholars treat their prose as sacred text: obscure jargon is jealously guarded. Communicating with the general public is not their main goal – which is why academics rarely feature in the pages of **NI.** But Nancy is an exception. My aim is for you to find the discovery of her work as moving an experience as I did.

Wayne Ellwood

Wayne Ellwood
*for the **New Internationalist** Co-operative*

The Ruined Maid

Here is a postscript by the British novelist and poet Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) to last month's issue on *Prostitution* **(NI 252)**. It is from a poem entitled *The Ruined Maid:*



'O 'Melia my dear, this does everything crown!
Who could have supposed I should meet you in town?
And whence such fair garments, such prosperity?'
'O didn't you know I'd been ruined?' said she.

'You left us in tatters, without shoes or socks,
Tired of digging potatoes and spudding up docks;
And now you've gay bracelets and bright feathers three!'
'Yes, that's how we dress when we're ruined,' said she.

'I wish I had feathers, a fine sweeping gown,
And a delicate face, and could strut about Town!'
'My dear – a raw country girl such as you be
Cannot quite expect that. You ain't ruined,' said she.

Peter Little
Henley, UK

No judgement intended

By mistake a sentence on Brazil and a paragraph on Africa were inserted into the article by us entitled 'The Healthy Hooker' **(NI 252)**. The information in those passages is fragmentary and capable of a variety of interpretations. Some come from controversial studies whose ethical standards are viewed by many of our colleagues as falling well below what is acceptable. Furthermore it may be taken as implying a judgement on sex workers in Brazil and Africa, which was not intended.

Catherine Healy and Anna Reed
New Zealand Prostitutes' Collective,
Wellington, Aotearoa/New Zealand

The **New Internationalist** welcomes your letters. But please keep them short. They may be edited for purposes of space or clarity. Include a home telephone number if possible and send your letters to the nearest editorial office. The address is inside the front cover.

Telly – no thanks!

I read Teeare Scarrott's article in your issue on *Mexico* **(NI 251)** with great interest, and agree that we can do without so many 'essentials' in our homes.

But I am surprised that he does not mention television. In a lifetime spent without it, I find I am well-enough informed about the world by publications, and, feeling I can spend time better than being entertained by pictures on a box, I am relieved of the distress of seeing the violence friends describe on television.

Surely of all the unecessary items in our lives, television is the one we need least; surely we would all be happier and healthier without it?

Isobel Shepherd
London, UK

Grassroots work

Congrats on your timely re-examination of the issues surrounding *AIDS* **(NI 250)**. Thanks especially to Maggie Black for highlighting the work of TASO and Sister Ursula in Uganda, and her exposé of larger agencies' lip service to the 'community response'.

I worked on a Community AIDS Project in Rakai District in Uganda, where among other activities we were involved in training people to care for AIDS patients at home. The health service in Rakai has been decimated by war and health cuts.

I must, however, take issue with your statement that 'in some villages there are only children and grandparents'. This is simply not true and inaccurate reporting like this is not of benefit to those working at the grassroots.

David Joyce
Limerick, Ireland

Steiner schools

Thank you for your issue on *Education* **(NI 248)** which so clearly demonstrated the threats facing educational ideals worldwide. As a parent with children at a Waldorf (Steiner) school I am conscious that my children are privileged to be treated as being of body, soul and spirit by teachers who work hard both outwardly and inwardly in their study of the development of a child. The combined threats from the commercial/economic sphere on the one hand and by State domination on the other suggests to me that we need to find other models of social and political structures within which education can develop in greater freedom. Waldorf schools are one of the largest-growing educational movements in the North at present with over 500 schools.

Steiner himself offered such a model when he suggested that it was the task of government to ensure that all children have the right and means to obtain an education, and the task of the economy to provide the resources. He foresaw the need to distinguish more clearly between three 'spheres' of society: rights and the law; economic life, and culture. If the characteristics of each sphere can be adequately recognized in future, there is a better chance of establishing harmonious and sustainable development.

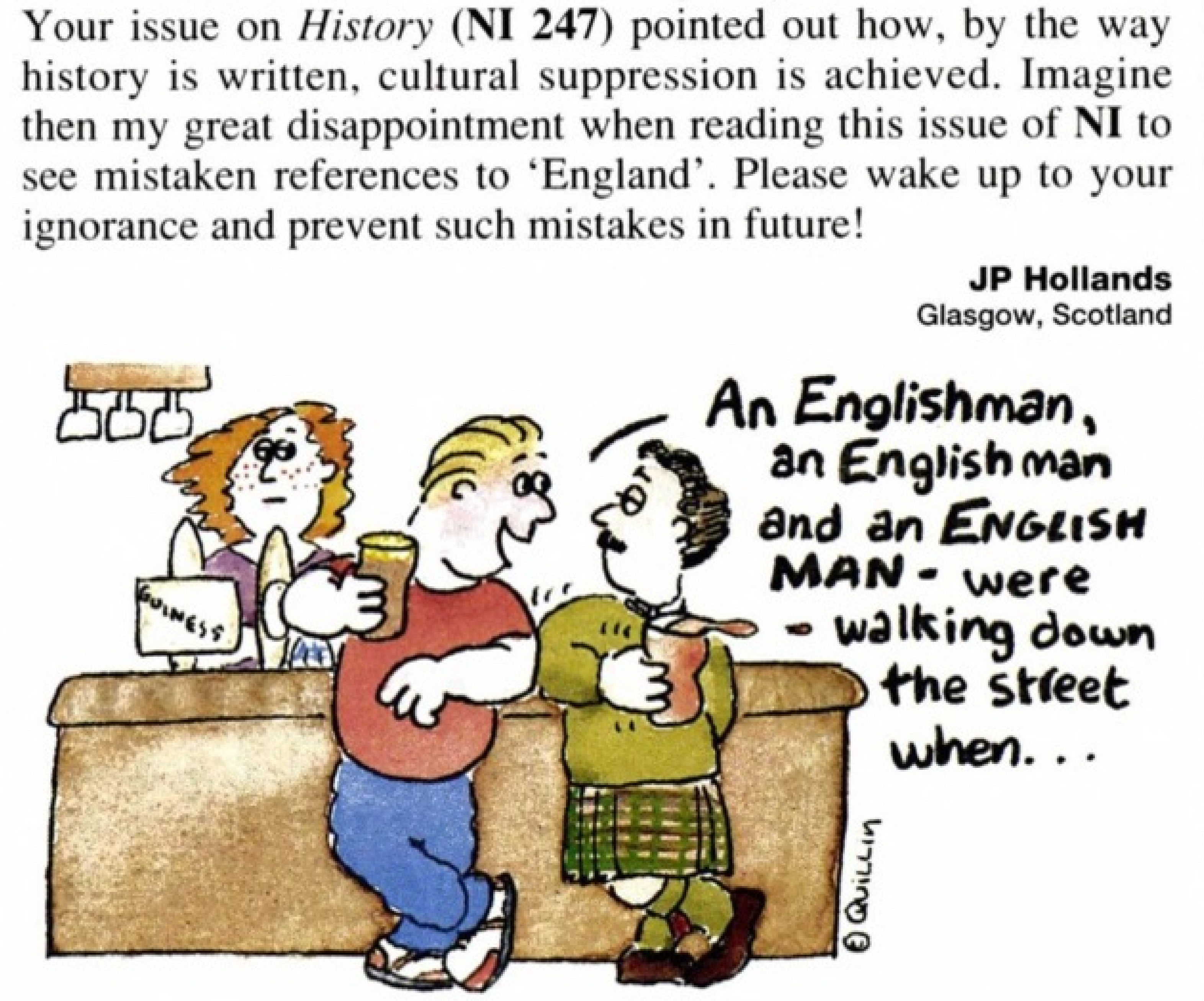
Sebastian Tombs
Edinburgh, Scotland

England's rule

As an Englishman living in Scotland I am painfully aware of the abuse of the word 'England' when 'Great Britain' or the 'United Kingdom' should be used. To refer to the UK as 'England' is to further advance the already considerable cultural dominance of the rest of the UK by England.

Your issue on *History* **(NI 247)** pointed out how, by the way history is written, cultural suppression is achieved. Imagine then my great disappointment when reading this issue of **NI** to see mistaken references to 'England'. Please wake up to your ignorance and prevent such mistakes in future!

JP Hollands
Glasgow, Scotland


An Englishman, an Englishman and an ENGLISH MAN - were - walking down the street when. . .
© Quillin

VIV QUILLIN

People of colour

You list groups in Aotearoa/New Zealand that deal with certain aspects of *Liberty* **(NI 249)**.

In this country, as in other white colonial societies, liberty is of great concern to people of colour, and there are many organizations in their communities which have been active on these issues for decades.

Two of these are: *Nga Kaiwhakama- rama i Nga Ture* (Maori Legal Service), PO Box 6528, Wellington, Aotearoa/New Zealand. *Ngati Te Ata,* c/o Ms Waatara Black, PO Box 138, Waiuku, Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Sue Culling
Corso, Dunedin, Aotearoa/New Zealand

In praise of porn

I consider the 'Sex and Freedom' article in your issue on *Liberty* (**NI 249**) to be very exaggerated and extreme in tone.

Speaking as a man of 70 who has no sex-life outside masturbation, I do buy so-called 'soft porn'. I don't know where Catherine Itzin lives, but she implies that the sort of material I buy is in the same category as the appalling and depraved material where unmentionable things are done to women and children. This kind of material must surely be bought by a tiny minority. All that nearly all men need and want from pornography is enough exposed female flesh to bring them to erection and ejaculation.

A crackdown on pornography that worked would simply drive a minority of very tense, frustrated men into rape, indecent exposure and abuse.

Anon
Gloucestershire, UK

World without hope

After reading some copies of the **NI,** I feel that the world is left without hope and that there are not enough people willing to do something about it. Furthermore I am not sure that the number is increased by your readers. Do you ever ask your more candid friends what effect an article or an issue has on them? Does it inspire or depress? Do they know what could be done about it, how and by whom? Haven't you become too much like professional journalists?

I realize that my letter may sound negative, the very thing that must be avoided. There really are, in my opinion, plenty of achievements to applaud and sound idealists to record.

Nicholas Gillett
Malpas, Cheshire, UK

Editor: We try to have a fair number of campaigning issues, and give ideas for action wherever possible. We are also instituting a regular slot later in the year, which will be an interview with some of the 'idealists' you mention. We hope this helps!

The views expressed on the letters page are not necessarily those of the NI.

Letter from Lagos

Vanity Fair

To dye or not to dye? **Elizabeth Obadina** learns her lessons as hair and skin become victims in the battle for beauty in Nigeria.

MIDWEEK. Midmorning. A time when I should have been working. A time when visitors rarely call. But I'm not working. I'm lurking furtively around the remotest garden tap. My hair appears to have had an affair with the compost heap. It is full of green bits and every now and then a trickle of rust appears on my neck and face to dry like blood on my skin. I am not a pretty sight. I am undergoing a beauty treatment.

At forty-something, and greying, vanity has got the better of me. It was a chance encounter with Ilona, my Hungarian friend at the school gate that began my transformation into a mildewed vision from hell. 'Eleezabetta. Oh Eleezabetta,' she warbled. 'Why you no look beautiful any more? Why you let all this grey come? Don't you know we married Nigerians eh? So you want to let a young and beautiful second, perhaps third, wife to come and share your husband now? Yes? No: you must get rid of the grey. Yes.'

ILLUSTRATION: MIRIAM McCURDY

Now my husband had never mentioned my grey hair or much else for that matter about my appearance. Maybe he was quietly casting a roving eye elsewhere. Ilona was positive he had to be. She arrived that evening with a 'nearly-black' wash-out-in-six-shampoos hair colour. It was past its sell-by date; common enough for Nigerian imports which range from British right-hand-drive cars which have failed their roadworthiness tests – Nigerians need left-hand-drive cars – to Italian toxic wastes and ancient EC beef surpluses.

That night I had nearly-black hair. My husband didn't notice. However, he did notice my purple hair the following night. I don't know whether it was the out-of-date chemicals or the tropical sun that achieved the purple look but my husband waxed scornful about people – like me – who risk their health using lead-based blackening pomades (another British export) to destroy the 'distinguished' look of grey hair. He's getting grey hair too. I told him I hadn't used lead, arsenic, asbestos or any other poison or carcinogen as a beauty aid. He said the results spoke for themselves and lapsing into sarcasm said I was clearly the sort to try out a skin-lightener to restore my weather-beaten white skin to a pink and creamy childhood complexion.

Mercury-based bleaching creams, another British contribution to the dermatological health of African nations, were banned by the Nigerian Government in 1988, but are nevertheless freely available and used by many Nigerian women who believe that black is not beautiful. 'Fanta faces,' the local kids call them after the fizzy orange drink. 'Fair-skinned' is how the consumer sees herself, and mercury-poisoning and taut, paper-thin, permanently-ruined skin seems a small price to pay.

By the same token visiting whites sacrifice themselves to melanomas, despite vastly superior European health education, by sunning themselves under the scorching tropical sun – and all for a more beautiful brown skin.

But back to my purple hair. My kids thought the purple was deliberate; a calculated act designed to embarrass them by adopting a pathetically dated punk hairstyle. I was ordered not to show my face near the school gates until 'something had been done'. There was only blond hair-colour left on the supermarket shelf. I baulked, fed up with out-of-date beauty aids from a bottle, and went to the market in search of something 'natural'.

The herbs and spices trader didn't speak English. So a lot of people volunteered to explain my need for something to turn my hair another colour, preferably brown. She understood and shovelled a medium-sized plastic bag full of crushed leaves I took on trust to be henna. She mimed that I should mix them to a green gunge with water and plaster this over my hair. I got the message and headed home. I went to the bathroom first but soon discovered that henna leaves a trail like the aftermath of a chainsaw massacre.

Out in the garden I thought I would never wash the gritty green particles from my hair. It didn't help that the government water tap ran dry halfway through the palaver. But I did get rid of the grey and the purple. My natural brown looked browner, and the grey... 'What do you call that colour?' asked my youngest. 'Autumn leaves,' I said, pleased with myself. 'What's autumn?' he said. 'A time when Europeans become senile and their brain cells die off,' said my husband, who at last has begun to notice my appearance.

Elizabeth Obadina is a freelance writer and journalist who lives in Lagos.

Foot of the **factory**, **foot** of the cane

I have seen death without weeping.
The destiny of the Northeast is death.
The cattle they kill,
but to the people they do something worse.

Geraldo Vandre, *Diaspora*

*The subjects treated by **Nancy Scheper-Hughes** are not for the faint of heart. Introducing her account of everyday life and death in Brazil's Northeast she explains how and why she faced up to them.*

THERE was an artist living on our block on South Third Street in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn. He lived in a basement apartment, the kind below street level with iron bars across the windows, so that when you looked out all you could see were amputated legs and feet scurrying across pavement. We didn't have a clue that the funny little man – Morris Kish was his name – was anything at all until he invited several neighbors to a 'showing' in his flat. We children sat together, in the front, on straight-backed kitchen chairs, half expecting we would have to suppress gales of laughter. For what could Morris Kish ever think to paint?

I remember quickly becoming lost in a swirl of colors, vivid impressions and impish magic. He showed us what *we* never thought to see in the rundown, workaday world of Williamsburg. But what I remember most of all in those huge surprise canvasses were the men of Berry Street, South First and South Second converging on the front gates of the black monster that dominated our landscape, which we knew only as the 'Sugar House'.

Those of us who grew up at the foot of the factory all responded to the movements of the beast. We woke to its shrill whistles. Its humming and clangings were a permanent backdrop to all our conversations. We breathed its foul fumes. Finally we went to bed to the sound of foghorns guiding ships and their precious cargo into its docks.

It is no coincidence that my anthropology finally brought me 'home' to Northeastern Brazil, to those verdant but cloying fields of sugarcane (more akin, Claude Levi-Strauss was to write, to 'open-air factories, than to a landscape') to work with people who invariably describe themselves as having grown up 'at the foot' of the cane.

Bom Jesus da Mata is a pseudonym, although the Alto do Cruzeiro is not. At first sight it appears to be a typical 'developing' town in an aggressively self-conscious modernizing nation. Its residents take pride in its dynamic rhythms, exaggerated by the constant din from trucks and public speakers tuned to the municipal radio station. Until the 1970s the public speaker system was turned on at 5.30 am and went off precisely at 9 pm with the playing of 'Silent Night', which during the military years signaled the start of curfew. Lights went out on the main street, and kerosene lamps were lit on the three hillside Altos, giving the town its nickname, 'the mountain princess'. The candlelit Altos (hills or heights) were the jewels of

On foot in the Alto de Cruzeiro with heavy and painful cargoes.

the crown, and from a safe distance one could hardly fault that lilting description.

Bom Jesus has all the trappings of modernity. Its single, long main street was newly paved in 1989, replacing its more picturesque cobblestones, and cars, trucks and motorbikes whiz by in disdainful contempt of pedestrians. Some of those on foot carry heavy or painful cargoes in their arms, across their shoulders, or on their heads: a dozen or more hammocks neatly folded and precariously balanced; a TV set to be delivered to an elegant home; *fiera* baskets filled with sweet manioc, mangoes and bananas; a deathly sick infant carefully wrapped and hidden in stone-washed sugar sacking.

The candlelit Altos were the jewels of the crown, and from a safe distance one could hardly fault that lilting description.

If one veers off the main street and takes the dusty, sometimes muddy footpaths that criss-cross the town the images of modernity vanish. One is immediately plunged into another world. If one descends into the dried-fish market or into the small *zona* (the red light district), or if one climbs the Altos, the trucks and cars give way to horses, donkeys and stray goats. At night on each of the hillside Altos the entertainment is provided not by televisions and stereos but by African circle dances and bawdy troubadours, called *repentista* singers, whose witty verses tumble the mighty and exalt the lowly and the weak.

Here we enter a rural world, an extension into the city of the *mata* – the country, the woods, the forest. The people who have come to reside in the hillside crevices of Bom Jesus look very different from the bronzed Europeans who are their bosses. Their faces are browner; their bodies are smaller and slighter. One can see both the Amerindian and the African in their eyes, cheekbones, hair and skin, although it is the African that predominates.

I first lived and worked in the Alto do Cruzeiro from 1964 through to the end of 1966. My experience of this small and tormented community now spans a quarter of a century. My story begins in a specific relationship to the community, one generally thought of today in critical and enlightened anthropological circles as something of a stigma, just one step removed, perhaps, from a Christian missionary: I was a 20-year-old public health/community development worker with the Peace Corps. Ours was the first group sent into the state of Pernambuco. We arrived on the coat-tails of a 'bloodless' and 'peaceful' military coup in the spring of 1964 that turned out to be not so bloodless or blameless as time wore on.

The 16-year hiatus between the time I left Bom Jesus at the close of 1966 and my initial return in 1982 meant that all of us had changed, some almost unrecognizably so. Meanwhile I, *Dona Nancí,* was now both a mother and an anthropologist.

The original – and in many respects still the central – thesis of my research and of this story is love and death in the Alto do Cruzeiro, specifically mother love and child death. It is about the culture of scarcity, both material and psychological.

As a woman and a feminist – although not a conventional one – I am drawn (I won't say 'naturally') to the experience of women. Mothers and children dominate these pages just as they dominate Alto life. So I return again and again to the lives of Lordes, Biu, Antonieta and their neighbors on the Alto do Cruzeiro, Northeast Brazil, to illustrate in a graphic way the consequences of hunger, death, abandonment and loss on ways of thinking, feeling, acting and being in the world.

Foot of the factory, foot of the cane. We are all implicated, as workers and as consumers, in the vicious sugar cycle and the 'deadly misery' it leaves in its wake. As a child of the Williamsburg Eastern European (later Puerto Rican) slum, I was marked by the image of the Sugar House. In writing about the cane cutters and their families of Bom Jesus da Mata I am also reaching out to touch the fading images of those other sugar workers whose faces I remember, as it turns out, only in the impressionistic paintings of Morris Kish.

We are all implicated, as workers and as consumers, in the vicious sugar cycle and the 'deadly misery' it leaves in its wake.

These are no ordinary lives that I am about to describe. Rather, they are short, violent and hungry lives. I am offering a glimpse into *Nordestino* society through a glass darkly. It entails a descent into a Brazilian heart of darkness that touches on some of our worst fears about 'human nature' and about mothers and infants in particular.

You may well experience a sense of indignation: 'Why am I being served this?' Death is never an easy topic, not for science, not for art. But lest we forget: reading, reflecting, writing are as nothing in comparison with the cost to those who have lived the stories told here. And these lives, these faces, although pained and as fleeting as photos, have also been touched with beauty and grace. ■

Movement of the beast: a sugarcane factory dominates the landscape and the lives of Pernambuco

SEBASTIaO SALGADO / MAGNUM

Bom Jesus from the Alto

Bom Jesus – A History

Originally Bom Jesus was part of a large land grant awarded by the Portuguese crown to a sixteenth-century colonist.

By the early nineteenth-century the **latifúndio** (estate) fell into the hands of a ruthless **fazendeiro** (landowner) named Antônio José Guimarães, a cotton and sugar planter, slaveowner and textile merchant.

In 1847 a small **posse** of freemen

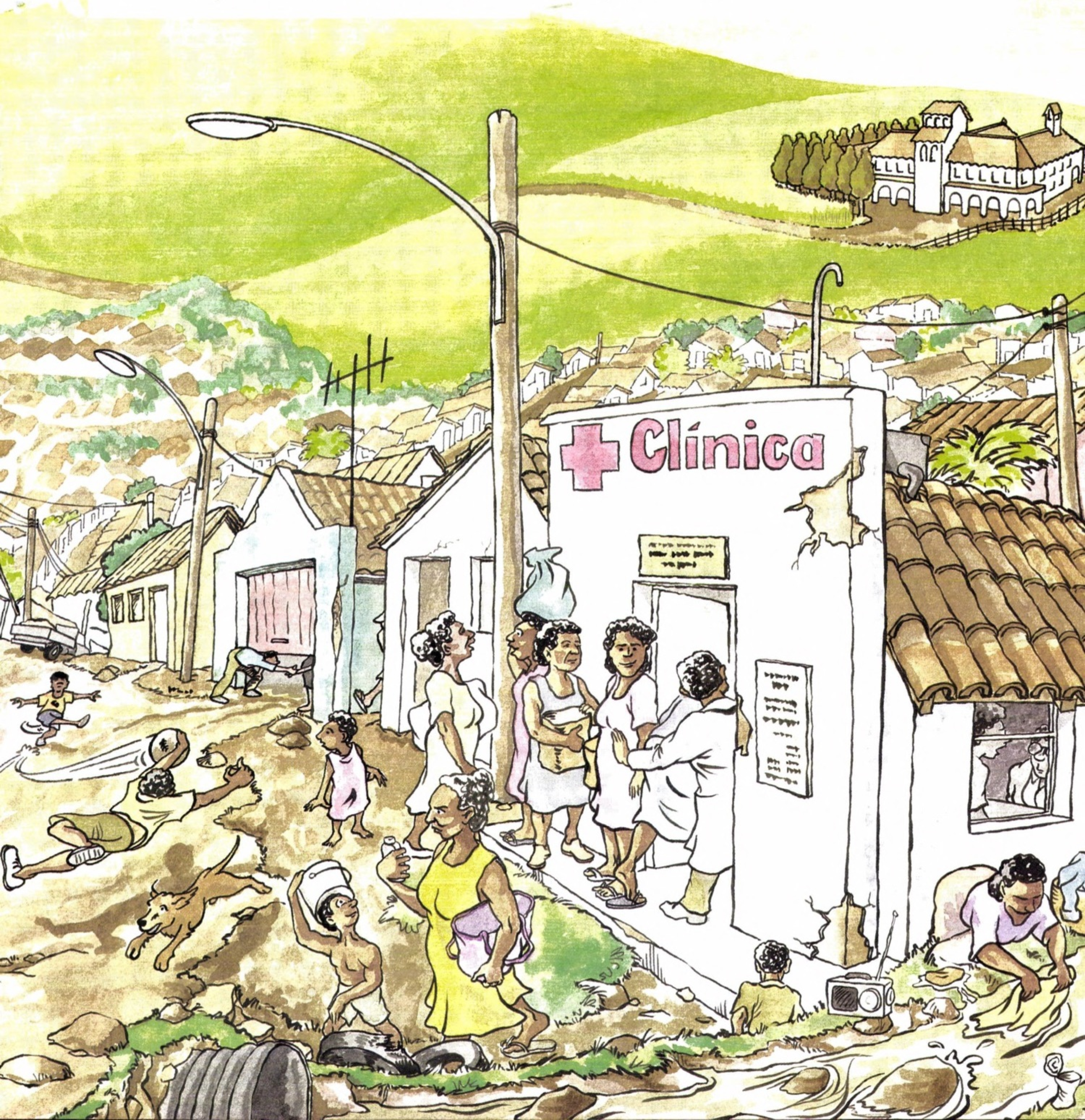
Cerveja
Coke
MAZDA
BRICK

invaded the **casa grande** of the despised 'Portuguese' and murdered him. The murder of one despot allowed for the multiplication of other, smaller despots.

In the early decades of the twentieth century the cane-cultivating region crept further into the area covered by the **municipio** (municipality). Today it contains three large **usinas** (sugar factories) and more than seventy small **engenhos** (plantations) for the cultivation of sugarcane.

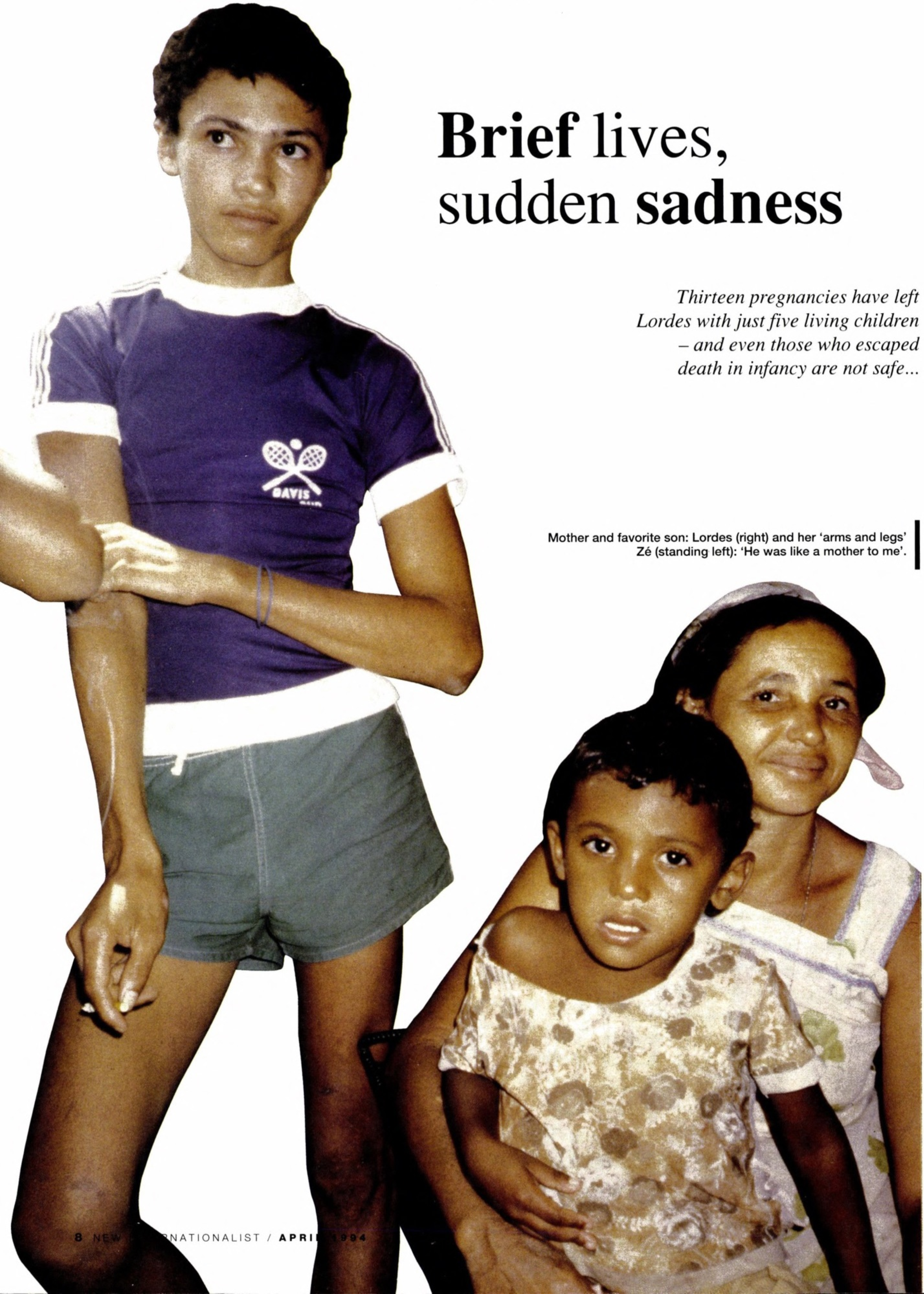
In 1890 the population of the **municipio** was 28,250; by 1980 it had scarcely doubled to 54,588, but people had moved from the countryside into the town.

There are now **bairro** (shanty-town) 'occupations' on the three municipally-owned **altos** (hills) surrounding the downtown and along the margins of the Capibaribe River. The **bairros** contain more than half of the town's population.



Brief lives, sudden **sadness**

Thirteen pregnancies have left Lordes with just five living children – and even those who escaped death in infancy are not safe...



Mother and favorite son: Lordes (right) and her 'arms and legs' Zé (standing left): 'He was like a mother to me'.

LORDES

De profundis clamavi ad te, Domine (From the depths I call to you, O Lord): graveyards lie in wait for souls tortured by hunger.

SEBASTIAO SALGADO / MAGNUM

IT was noon when they came to get me, the time when I could pull the wooden shutters closed and fasten the bar against the split doors and shut out the heat, the suffocating push and shove of Alto life. But they got to me this time anyway because it was my *comadre* Antonieta who was banging on the back door.

'It's Lordes,' she cried, 'her time has come, and the *parteira* hasn't returned from Saturday market. You'll have to help.' And then we were running, tripping up the hill, through the litter-strewn backyards, under barbed wire clothes-lines, past exposed latrines, digging our fingers into the moist dirt for leverage, knowing I shouldn't do that, all the while arguing with Antonieta: 'Why didn't you warn old Mariazinha that Lordes's time was near?'

And I hardly remember saying, *'Força, força menina'* (push hard, girl), give it all you've got, because she didn't have to, really, and suddenly the slippery, blue-gray thing was in my hands, cold and wet as it slid over them.

I had to pull the tight, tense rope away from its scrawny neck, but the rope resisted and coiled in my hands like an angry telephone cord. 'Scissors, scissors,' I begged, but the old neighborhood women shook their heads, looking absently from one to the other, until Biu, Lordes's second half-sister, arrived sheepishly with a pair that looked suspiciously like the ones that had disappeared from my medical kit some weeks earlier.

The smell of hot flesh and dried blood filled the single room of the lean-to, trapped in by the scrap-metal roof. There was no water in the big clay jug, just the pebbles and slime that gather at the bottom. Valdimar slowly and patiently dug outside. On hitting a rock he stopped to call out: 'Is it here yet?' The old women in a semicircle around the fire, bent over a faintly squawking chicken, laughed and called back: 'Stop digging, Valdimar. She's only a small woman, you know.'

The cord lay thin and cool, pulsating between my fingers. I needed a strong piece of string. I would have to make do with my knotted and dirty key string. Antonieta stood over me, anxiously biting her lips. My hand didn't want to cut, but even under the dull edge of the scissors the cord was less resistant than I had expected, and the sensation of cutting hidden flesh was at my fingers and up my spine, and I couldn't stop the pounding in my ears...

I am not deaf, gentle Valdimar. I have heard the bells of Our Lady of Sorrows.

The old women were gathered around the baby now, tying it up in scraps of satin, ribbon and torn lace. So little I could not look. Outside, Valdimar's shovel again scraped against rock. My hands forced down on Lordes's soft belly, while Antonieta tugged. Her mouth was still open, but no sound emerged as the rest finally slid out. I took the baby up in my hands and handed it to the old women, who wrapped it in a cloth, cleaner than what we had used to stop up Lordes's bleeding, and they passed the placenta through the opening to the waiting Valdimar. As if he were the father, so tender he was for her.

And it was blessedly cool and dark where I finally slid down home to rest. Cool and dark and wrapped up in a hollow, hidden in branches of green and brown. Safe at last...

Valdimar, his black face twisted into a smirking grin, is not really always laughing. He is outside my door, calling softly, *'Nancí, oh Dona Nancí'*. He has come to break the news, to tell me what I already know. Will I come and eat chicken with Lordes and the others? No, I'll eat later, after we bury the baby in its little patchwork shroud, lying in its cardboard shoe box, covered with purple tissue and a silver paper cross. I am not deaf, gentle Valdimar. I have heard the bells of Our Lady of Sorrows. And they, at least, have touched the void: *de profundis clamavi ad te, Domine.*

In 1966 I was called on for a second time to help Lordes deliver a child, this one a fair and robust little tyke with a lusty cry. But while Lordes showed great interest in the newborn, she ignored Zezinho (Zé), who spent his days miserably curled up in a fetal position and lying on a piece of urine-soaked cardboard beneath his mother's hammock.

I finally decided to intervene. 'Give me that child,' I said, 'for he'll never escape death in your house!' Lordes did not protest, but the creche mothers laughed at my efforts on behalf of such a hopeless case. Zé himself resisted the rescue with a perversity matching my own. He refused to eat, and he wailed pitifully whenever anyone approached him. The creche mothers advised me to leave Zé alone. They said that they had seen babies like this one, and 'if a baby *wants* to die, it *will* die'.

'Give me that child,' I said, 'for he'll never escape death in your house!'

I continued to do battle with the boy, who finally succumbed: he began to eat, although he never did more than pick at his food. Indeed it did seem that Zé had no 'taste' for life. As he gained a few kilos his huge head finally had something to balance on. He reminded one of a frightened Brazilian spider monkey. I was proud of my 'success' and of proving the creche mothers wrong. Zé *would* live after all!

But what was I doing? Could Zé ever be 'right' again? Would he have been better off dead after all that I had put him through? And what of Lordes? I would soon be returning him to Lordes in her miserable lean-to on the trash-littered Vultures' Path. Was this fair to her? She barely had enough to sustain herself and her newborn. But she did agree to take Zé back.

When I returned in 1982 Lordes was no longer living in her lean-to but was still in desperate straits, still fighting to put together some semblance of a life for her five living children, the oldest of whom was Zé, now a young man of 17. Much was made of my reunion with Lordes and Zé, and the story was told again and again of how I had whisked Zé away when he was all but given up for dead and had force-fed him like a fiesta turkey. Zé laughed the hardest of all at these 'survivor tales' and at his own near-miss with death at the hands of an 'indifferent' mother. They obviously enjoyed a close and affectionate relationship, and while we spoke Zé draped his arm protectively around his little mother's shoulders.

On my next return to Bom Jesus in 1987 I was told the news immediately: 'Go find Lordes – she has suffered a terrible tragedy. She is mad with grief.' I found her at home disconsolate, plunged into profound mourning. With tears coursing freely down her suddenly, prematurely aged cheeks she explained that her favorite son, her 'arms and legs', had been brutally murdered on the night of the feast of São Pedro by his lover's ex-husband. Zé had been fooled; he never knew his girlfriend had a husband.

Lordes struck her breast in grief. 'If only my Zé were alive today,' she said, 'my life would not be one of suffering and misery... He was like a mother to me.' ■

Washing in streams infested with disease and toxins, the women of the Alto face a constant conflict with illness.

The madness of hunger

No other calamity has quite the shattering effects on personality and behaviour as the experience of acute hunger.

I HAVE seen deaths from hunger and they are not very pretty. The people of Bom Jesus sometimes refer to them as *doença de cão* – literally dog's disease. They are referring to rabies, which in Portuguese is called *raiva* – literally rage, fury, madness. The madness of hunger is indeed very much like rabies and it is truly a dog's death.

References to the *delírio*, the madness of hunger, can be found as early as the sixteenth century in the writings of Portuguese navigators, and it is still a recurring theme in Brazilian literature now. It is the subjective voice, the primary experience of hunger.

Since 1964 I have been seeing starvation: a host of children of one and two years who cannot sit up unaided, who do not or cannot speak, whose skin is stretched so tightly over the chest and stomach that every curve of the breastbone and ribs stands out. The arms, legs and buttocks of these children are often stripped of flesh so that the skin hangs in folds. The buttocks are often discoloured. The bones of the face are fragile, the eyes prominent, the hair thin and wispy. The eyelashes can be extraordinarily long. Some children take on an unnatural waxen appearance that their mothers sometimes see as a kind of death mask.

At first one's ear is jarred by the way hunger and *nervos* ('nervousness') are interchangeable in the language of the Alto. For this poor and hungry population many of the physiological symptoms of which they complain are also symptoms of chronic hunger. And during the past two decades of my involvement with them I have seen a discourse of *nervos* and sickness replace a discourse on angry hunger.

Because the people of Alto do Cruzeiro suffer, truly suffer from headaches, tremors, weakness, tiredness, irritability, angry weeping and other symptoms of what people call *nervos*, they look to the doctors, pharmacists and political bosses and patrons from Bom Jesus for a 'cure' to the 'sickness'. They line up in clinics, in drug stores, in the municipal dispensary and they want powerful medicines to make them 'strong' and 'lively'. They do not leave without these magical, potent prescription drugs: *vitaminas, fortificantes, sôro*, but also antibiotics, painkillers and sleeping pills. And they get them, if they're lucky, even without paying for them.

Why medicine? If it is power that the leading families who supply them want, why not simply distribute food to hungry people? Medicalization mystifies. It isolates the experience of misery and it domesticates people's anger. There is power and domination to be extracted from the defining of a population as 'sick' or 'nervous'. To acknowledge hunger (which is not a disease but a social illness) would be tantamount to political suicide among leaders whose power comes from the same plantation economy that produced that hunger in the first place.

Mother love

Something happens to the myths of motherhood when, in a land of terrible scarcity, infants die of mortal neglect. ***Nancy Scheper-Hughes*** *argues for a 'political economy of the emotions' that replaces poetics with pragmatism.*

I ARGUE that a high expectancy of child death is a powerful shaper of maternal thinking and practice. This is evidenced, in particular, in delayed attachment to infants who are sometimes thought of as temporary household 'visitors'. The detachment can be mortal at times, contributing to the severe neglect of certain infants and to a 'failure' to mourn the death of very young babies.

I am *not* arguing that mother love, as we understand it, is deficient or absent in the threatened little human community of Bom Jesus. Rather, the course of mother love is different, shaped by overwhelming economic and cultural constraints. The discussion attempts to overcome the distinctions between 'natural' and 'socialized' affects, between 'deep' private feelings and 'superficial' public sentiments – to show how emotion is shaped by political and economic context as well as by culture. It can be understood as a 'political economy' of the emotions.

My analysis and findings challenge the psychological infant attachment and maternal 'bonding' theorists *and* those cultural feminists who argue for a singular conception of women's goals, interests and moral visions. I am referring to those who emphasize an essentially 'womanly' ethic and ethos of maternal responsiveness, attentiveness and caring labor.

Mother love is anything *other* than natural. Instead it represents a matrix of images, meanings, sentiments and practices that are everywhere socially and culturally produced. In place of the poetics of motherhood I refer to the pragmatics of motherhood; for – to paraphrase Marx – these shantytown women create their own culture, but they do not create it just as they please or under circumstances chosen by themselves.

Love is always ambivalent and dangerous. Why should we think that it is any less so between a mother and her children?

I discovered while working as a medic during the 1960s that it was possible – and hardly difficult – to rescue infants and toddlers from premature death from diarrhea and dehydration by using simple sugar, salt and water solution (even bottled Coca-Cola worked fine at a pinch). It was, however, much more difficult to enlist mothers themselves in the rescue of a child they perceived as ill-fated for life or as better off dead. Eventually I learned to inquire warily before intervening: 'Dona Maria, do you think we should try to save this child?' or, even more boldly, 'Dona Auxiliadora, is this a child worth keeping?' And if the answer was no, as it sometimes was, I learned to keep my distance.

Love is always ambivalent and dangerous. Why should we think that it is any less so between a mother and her children? And yet it has been the fate of mothers throughout history to appear in strange and distorted forms. Mothers are sometimes portrayed as larger than life, as all-powerful, and sometimes as all-destructive. Or mothers are represented as powerless, helplessly dependent, and angelic. Simultaneously powerful and powerless, it is no wonder that artists, scholars and psychoanalysts can never seem to agree whether 'mother' was the primary *agent* or the primary *victim* of various domestic tragedies. And so myths of a savagely protective 'maternal instinct' compete at various times and places with the myth of the equally powerful, devouring, 'infanticidal' mother.

To describe some poor women as aiding and abetting the deaths of certain of their infants can only be seen as 'victim blaming'. But the alternative is to cast women as passive 'victims' of their fate, as powerless, without will, agency or subjectivity. There must be a way to look dispassionately at the problem of child survival and conclude that a child died from mortal neglect, even at her mother's own hands, without also blaming the mother – that is, without holding her personally and morally accountable.

Related to this is the persistent idea that mothers, *all* mothers, *must* feel grief, a 'depth of sorrow', in reaction to infant death. Women who do not show 'appropriate' grief are judged by psychoanalytic fiat to be 'repressing' their 'natural' maternal sentiments, to be covering them over with a culturally prescribed but *superficial* stoicism, or they might be seen as emotionally ravaged, 'numbed' by grief and traumatized by shock.

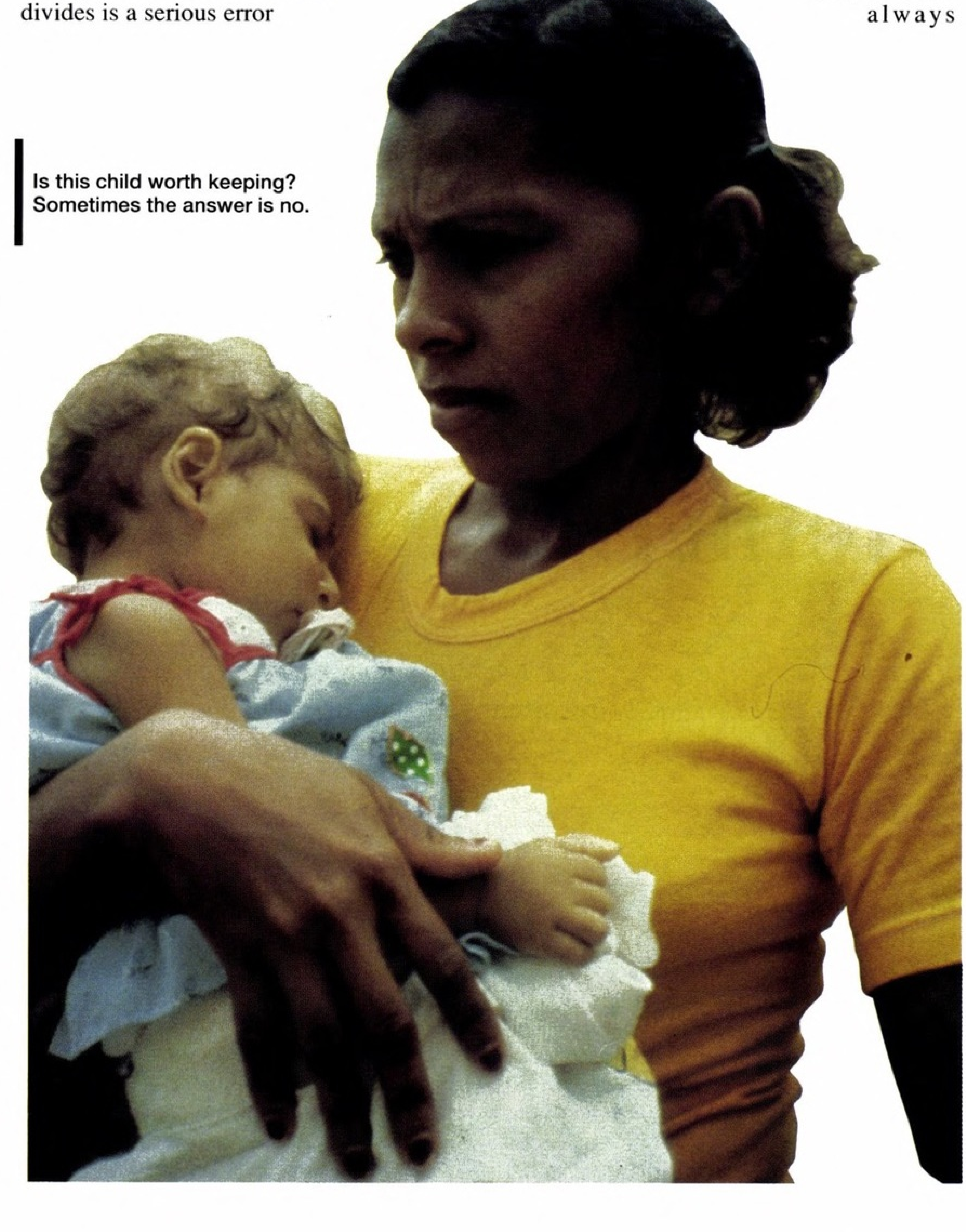
But it was indifference, not numbing shock, that I often observed. Someone who is traumatized does not – as these women do – shrug her shoulders and say cheerily: 'It's better the baby should die than either you or me'; and quickly become pregnant because little babies are interchangeable and easily replaced.

One may experience discomfort in the face of profound human differences, some of which challenge our cultural notions of the 'normal' and the 'ethical'. But to attribute 'sameness' across vast social, economic and cultural divides is a serious error for the anthropologist, who must begin, although cautiously, from a respectful assumption of difference.

Perhaps there is a middle ground between the two rather extreme approaches to mother love – the sentimentalized maternal 'poetics' and the mindlessly automatic 'maternal bonding' theorists, on the one hand, and the 'absence of love' theorists on the other. Between these is the reality of maternal thinking and practice.

On the Alto do Cruzeiro the birth of a child is hardly a time of rejoicing.

Alto mothers do sometimes turn away from certain ill-fated babies and abandon them to an early death in which their own neglect sometimes plays a final and definitive part. But maternal indifference does not always



Is this child worth keeping? Sometimes the answer is no.

All in a row and made to measure: children's coffins in Bom Jesus.

lead to death, and should an infant or a toddler show that he has a hidden 'talent' for life his mother may greet the 'doomed' child's surprising turnabout with grateful joy and deep lasting affection. And the same 'neglectful' mothers can exclaim that they live only for their grown children, some of whom only survive in spite of them. In so doing, these women are neither hypocritical nor self-delusional.

On the Alto do Cruzeiro the birth of a child is hardly a time of rejoicing. Mother love follows a tortured path, often beginning with a rocky start and fraught with many risks, dangers, separations and deaths. On this inhospitable, rocky outcrop mother love grows slowly, tentatively, fearfully. The resilient optimism that allows the mother to greet each new life gives way in the shantytown to dark clouds of pessimism, doubt and despair rooted in the unhappy experience of repeated infant death. 'Can it be,' asked Margarita, 'that Jesus wants me to leave this world without having raised a single living child?' And so the doubt allows a mother to reject an infant born weak and sickly as a child not worth keeping, a child without a knack for life.

'And so we say that "infants are like little birds" – here one moment, flying off the next.'

'What does it mean, *really*,' I asked Doralice, an older woman of the Alto who often intervenes in poor households to rescue young and vulnerable mothers and their threatened infants, 'to say that infants are like birds?'

'It means that... well, there is another expression you should know first. It is that all of us, our lives, are like burning candles. Any moment we can suddenly "go out without warning". But for the infant this is even more so. The grown-up, the adult, is very attached to life. One doesn't want to leave it with ease or without a struggle. But infants are not so connected, and their light can be extinguished very easily. As far as they are concerned, alive or dead, it makes no real difference to them. There is not that strong *will* to live that marks the big person. And so we say that "infants are like little birds" – here one moment, flying off the next. That is how we like to think about their deaths, too. We like to imagine our dead infants as little winged angels flying off to heaven to gather noisily around the thrones of Jesus and Mary, bringing pleasure to them and hope for us on earth.'

When an infant dies on the Alto do Cruzeiro there is neither great joy nor grief. A mother is likely to suggest that death came as a blessing. 'I feel free,' is a common response. This is not to say that women are cold or unfeeling. Often a mother will say: 'What a pity it is to see them suffer and die'. But pity is distinct from grief. The dead baby or 'little angel' is seen as a blameless creature whose future happiness lies in heaven.

Today in Bom Jesus an 'angel-baby' is sent to heaven, on average, once every other day. Traditional wakes for infants are brief, rarely lasting more than a couple of hours. There is a minimum of ceremony, there are no songs, prayers or rituals of any kind. Household life goes on as usual around the infant who is usually in a casket on the kitchen table. The baby's grandmother or godmother is in charge.

One particularly poignant infant wake followed the birthday party of a one-year-old child in the same household. Mariana, the middle-aged mother of the little girl, had purchased a birthday cake with candles, balloons and party favours. The fiesta lasted the better part of a Sunday afternoon and evening and the birthday girl in her ruffled dress was the centre of a great deal of attention.

Meanwhile, Mariana's 16-year-old daughter, herself the mother of a four-month-old, sat out the festivities. To engage her a bit I asked if I might take a peek at her baby. She led me into a back room where her infant, in an advanced stage of malnutrition, slept deeply. Next morning I was called back for the baby's wake and burial.

The young mother sat repairing a fishing net. The baby, in her white tunic, decoratively strewn with forget-me-nots, had taken the place of the birthday cake. A few crumbs of cake were still on the table. The previous day's birthday girl seemed confused by the muted atmosphere so soon after her own animated party. When she demanded to see her infant niece, Mariana carried the child to the table. 'Baby, baby,' said the toddler. 'Yes,' replied her tired mother, 'baby is sleeping', and she leaned over to adjust the infant in her tiny, cardboard coffin.

The strong mandate *not* to express grief or shed tears for the dead baby is reinforced by the belief that when the infant is in the coffin she is neither human child nor yet blessed little angel. She is struggling to leave this world and find her way into the next. The path is dark. A mother's tears can make the road slippery so the spirit-child will lose her footing, or the tears will fall on her wings and dampen them so she cannot fly.

In the end it seemed to me that the women of the Alto treat their dead infants as 'transitional objects'. A mother can 'let go' of a young child because she 'holds on' to an idealized image of 'spirit-children' populating the heavens. 'Angel-babies' in heaven substitute for the impossible attachment to half-live babies on earth.

Alto mothers spoke, at first covertly (often lowering their voices and looking about nervously to see who might be in earshot), of a folk syndrome, a cluster of signs and symptoms in the newborn and young baby that are greatly feared and from which mothers (and fathers) recoil. One way or another premature death is on the cards for these babies, and parents hope that it will be a rapid, not particularly 'ugly' death.

The symptoms and signs of child sickness refer to a host of serious pediatric conditions that, although not necessarily fatal, are deemed likely to leave the mother with a permanently damaged or severely disabled child: excessively weak or frail, retarded or mad, mute, epileptic, paralytic, crippled – in short, 'unprepared for life'.

Women say that there are seven, sometimes fourteen or twenty-one, different types of child sickness, each of them subsumed under two main poles: chronic and acute. There is little agreement among women on the identified 'varieties' and subtypes. Midwives, praying women and other traditional healers of the Alto recognize many more varieties than do ordinary Alto women.

The chronic sufferers are those infants born small and 'wasted'. They are often deathly pale babies, mothers say, as well as passive and unresponsive. Such infants demonstrate no vital force or liveliness. They do not suck vigorously. They hardly cry. They are 'uninterested' in food and, seemingly, in life itself. These babies die, mothers say, *à míngua*, of slow and gradual neglect. The term, a colloquialism, specifically indicates a death from wasting. Its literal meaning is to 'shrink' or 'shrivel up'. The same expression is used by women who have been recently abandoned by a husband or a lover. They say that their 'worst fear' is that they will be left to die *à míngua*, abandoned and hungry, wandering the streets like a miserable cur.

'*Treated, yes,* the baby can live,' agreed Rosália, 'but we *do not* treat it.'

At the other, more frightening and extreme pole, are those 'doomed' infants who die suddenly and violently. They are often recognized by a red flush or by purple blotches or other marks or discolorations of the skin or fingernails. These babies are given to fits, their little bodies may go into contortions, their backs and necks may become rigid or extended. The infant can be dead before the mother is even aware that anything is wrong. Célia's fated twin infants, for example, gave her 'no trouble' in dying: they simply 'shook, rolled their eyes to the back of their heads, and were still'.

Although any number of common childhood conditions can reproduce the symptoms of child attack – encephalitis, meningitis, umbilical tetanus – most infants presented as victims of this dreaded and acute disease are babies whose bodies are thrown into shock because of the electrolyte imbalance accompanying severe diarrhea/dehydration. It is the *delírio de sede*, the 'madness of thirst'. All of these life-threatening diseases – but especially the madness of thirst – are virulent but medically treatable conditions. And Alto mothers are themselves aware that child-saving interventions exist for such afflicted infants: '*Treated, yes,* the baby can live,' agreed Rosália, 'but we *do not* treat it.' 'Why not?' *'Não adianta,'* was her reply, 'there's no use'; even when treated the baby will emerge too damaged.

I still don't know exactly what prompts a mother or father to conclude their baby is a victim of 'child sickness'. But sometimes I think of the condemned babies of the Alto as ritual scapegoats, sacrificed in the face of terrible domestic conflicts about scarcity and survival. The Christian notion of the sacrificial lamb seems to be one way of deriving meaning from the otherwise 'senseless' assertions women made that their babies had to die.

'God knows the future better than you or me,' Zefinha told me during one discussion. 'If these babies were to live, they would cause much suffering in the mother. Our babies die to *save* us from pain and suffering, not to give us pain.'

And so a good part of learning how to be a mother on the Alto do Cruzeiro includes knowing when to let go of a child that shows it wants to die. The other part is knowing just when it is safe to let oneself go enough to love a child, to trust him or her to be willing to enter the struggle that is life on earth. ■

The madness of thirst

Drought images loom large among the people of Bom Jesus. They have a collective memory of the droughts of 1744, 1790, 1846, 1877 and 1932 – and personal recollections of the droughts of 1958, 1965 and 1987.

If there is one raw and vital nerve among *Nordestinos*, rich and poor alike, it is their horror of drought and thirst.

The people of Bom Jesus worry constantly about their drinking and bathing water, its quantity as well as its quality. Water, like sex, forms the backdrop of daily discourse so that any conversation has a way of veering back to the subject.

The paradox is that Bom Jesus is not located in the parched badlands of the *sertão* or even in the dry *agreste* but in the fertile *zona da mata*, where the rainfall is adequate during the well-defined 'winter' (April to August), when fear of drought is replaced briefly by fear of floods. But there is, as well, a long, hot, dry season from September to February – and it is the 'dry' not the 'wet' that has impressed itself on the populace.

Up through the 1970s the water supply was a large reservoir. The quality was good, although shortages and interruptions in supply increased with modernization as indoor plumbing became the norm for all but the poorest *bairros* of Bom Jesus.

The marginal *bairros* residents are dependent on several public water spigots or standpipes, some municipal, some state owned, others privately owned and operated. Only the Alto do Cruzeiro boasts its own community owned and operated spigots, built through the collective efforts of the members of the shantytown association.

Nonetheless there is still scarcity. In 1982 the state water utility company made a decision to supplement reservoir water with water from the local Caparibe River. Most residents of Bom Jesus, rich and poor alike, have long treated the local river as a cesspool and a dump. In addition to the chemical pollution of the river by the sugar industry, local shoe factories dispose of animal carcasses in the river, and the local hospital disposes of many contaminated medical and human wastes there as well.

And so even as elected officials declare the public water supply potable, in the privacy of their own homes all of them drink bottled mineral water, and many have installed elaborate filter systems to purify common bath- and dishwater.

By 1986, 70 per cent of the municipal water supply was being provided by the local river during the dry season. The tolerance of the community was fast approaching breaking point.

And so, in 1988, Padre Agostino Leal organized the largest mass demonstration in the recent history of Bom Jesus: a communitywide protest that attracted rich and poor. The demand was clear: clean water – NOW! For a precious brief moment Bom Jesus was united by a common fate, a collectively shared human need.

Biu on the roller coaster

Sandwiched between Antonieta and Lordes, Biu (pictured below) was once the most beautiful of the three half-sisters. Her life is like a roller coaster, its ups and downs colliding, sometimes jerking the cars off the tracks entirely.

ONE day I tried to find Biu in the smoky lean-to on the dirt path called the Third Crossing of the Indians. She was cooking outside on a small table using a little clay charcoal burner.

It was next to impossible to get her to be still long enough for an interview, let alone a life history. Her hands and legs were always in motion. She talked incessantly and almost always with a hand-rolled cigarette between her lips. She liked a pipe even better, but older Alto women had taken their pipes 'underground', smoking them only in the privacy of the out-house or late at night outside after everyone else was quite asleep.

Biu is my agemate. In 1989, at 45 years, she could easily be mistaken for a woman 20 years older. She has worked in fields and factories, in streams and on hillsides. She has cleared plantation lands, staked cut cane, fished, hunted for small game, collected grasses for animal feed and kindling for resale. She has worked in the infested river digging up sand for construction sites and washing pack animals. She has washed, starched, and ironed clothes for wealthy families, all outdoors and without the help of electricity.

I had to catch her story on the run and in small, disconnected fragments. These I have patched together into the semblance of a single, seamless narrative from several short conversations during the four days of Brazilian *carnaval* in 1988:

'There isn't much to tell about the early years. When I was little my situation was *triste*. I had to beg as soon as I could walk because my father left my mother soon after I was born. After my father left us, Mãe had to go out to work, so she gave me and Antonieta to Tia Josefa to raise. Often Tia sent the two of us out begging to help things along. Tia washed clothes and ironed them for a living, and we helped her with that work, and that's how we got by...

'When I was about eight years old we moved to Tia's house on the Alto do Cruzeiro, and Mama and Auntie tried to put me into school. But it wasn't for me. I was always into mischief; I even tore up all the schoolbooks. The teachers said that I was *malcriada* (poorly raised). Finally, they sent me home for good. I left without learning how to sign my name, and to this day I am a pure, unadulterated illiterate!

'At the age of 15 I ran off with Valdimar, the older brother of our neighbor Sebastiana, who lived on the Indians' Road. Valdimar was old, almost 50, and he was a widower. My family tried to prevent us from getting together. They raised every objection. Mama and Auntie said that Valdimar was too old for me, that he was "finished" (sterile and/or impotent), and that he was ugly and too dark. They said he would blacken our race. They said that Valdimar was a drunkard and that he ran around with other women. But I just laughed and wouldn't listen to a thing. I was determined to have that old black man no matter what!...

'So I was a mother by the age of 16. They were wrong about one thing. Valdimar was good in bed, and I had six pregnancies by him. My firstborn, Sonia, lived to be a year and four months, and then she died of *gasto*, the diarrhea that has no cure. By the time she died she was so wasted, and so was I. After that I had a

'The truth is I never wanted a husband under my roof, and getting pregnant always involved men.'

miscarriage. Then came another living child, a son named Severino, but he lasted only eight months. I began to have some luck, finally, when Edilese was born. You remember because you were her *mamãe de umbigo* (godmother of her navel), the one who cut her cord.

'I never much liked being a "wife", but I loved being pregnant. I adored it when I was huge with a pregnant belly! I always felt so beautiful. Pregnancy was my form of riches. Any woman who doesn't want babies shouldn't take a man in the first place. As for me, I had 15 pregnancies in my life, and if I hadn't got so disgusted with men I would have had 15 more. But as it was, after Mercea was born, I told the doctor to tie my tubes. I was willing to call it quits. The truth is I never wanted a husband under my roof, and getting pregnant always involved men. Although I've lived with men, I never took one for a husband. It was my choice. I am single today and, God willing, I will die the same...

'Life with Valdimar was pretty awful. Soon I lost my taste for sex with him. I left Valdimar several times. Six of those times I came back to him. I would put up with a lot, and then one day I would come home from work, dog-tired, and I'd take one look at him sleeping on the floor or in a hammock, dead drunk, and I would say to myself: "This is no head of house; this is a worthless bum". And when he came to, I'd put him out the door. If he refused to leave I would pack up a few things and leave myself. "Now *you* can take care of the kids," I would tell him.

'What kept me coming back? I'd begin to worry about the children. Or I'd think about getting old and skinny and worn out. I was beautiful once, but I was losing all the good looks I had. In the whole world Valdimar was really the only person I had. And I would look in the mirror and say: "Who would ever want you now?". I began to think of Valdimar as my "fate" in life, and so I would decide to make the best of it. But no sooner would I come back than he would do something to disappoint or annoy me and I would leave him again.

'And that's how it happened that we were living apart when Valdimar hung himself. It was his sister, Sebastiana, not me, who cut him loose. Valdmimar's end didn't surprise me. He was never right in his head. He would brood and brood and go for days without talking to anyone, and then suddenly he would fly into a rage. I once had him locked up in the "hospital for crazies" in Recife, but it didn't do him any good at all. He was a rum drinker and in the end it was the *cachaça* that turned his head for good.

'I like to work without anyone on my back telling me every minute what has to be done.'

'After Valdimar died I had nowhere to turn to. My family had all turned against me because I always did what I wanted. I never took their advice. So I did the only thing a woman in my situation could do. I'm not ashamed of it. I took the children with me by bus to Recife and I lived in the center of the city begging on the sidewalk. I would lay out a large piece of cardboard and set up my little clay burner, and that was how we lived, in the street up against a building next to the bridge. There was always a lot of action there and I could catch people coming and going across the bridge.

'But it was during this time that my firstborn daughter, Edilese, went bad on me. She ran away and became a street *moleque*. I lost her to the streets of Recife. Then my baby, my little son, died. His nervous system was too fragile for life on the street. He couldn't take all the noise and the fights and the violence. All I had left then was Edilene, my middle child, and I could see that she wasn't going to last too long either. I was killing the last of my children off, one by one. But it was not from ill-will toward them. No! Word of my situation got back to Tonieta, and she took pity on me. She told me to come back to Bom Jesus and to give her my Edilene to raise. I did, and that was the girl's only salvation. It's because of Tonieta that Edilene is alive and well today and a mother herself.

'After I returned to Bom Jesus I found myself a job on the Votas plantation. It was hard fieldwork, but I was happy again. I adore life in the country! I like to work without anyone on my back telling me every minute what needs to be done. I can see that for myself! When you work in the country you get paid by the amount of land you clear or weed, and the time you put in is up to you. I am a woman who was never afraid of work. Tonieta and Lordes were always ashamed to see me set off before dawn with a rag wrapped around my head and a pair of men's trousers covering my legs and held up with a piece of rope for a belt! "What a beauty!" they would say. But shame is for those who cheat and steal. Shame is for those who do violence to others. There is no shame in walking down the hill with a hoe across your back!

'It was while working in Votas that I met Oscar. I was assigned to a field where he was working, and we started joking with each other, calling each other names, and it didn't take long before we got together. And so I took up with another man after telling myself that I was completely through with men. I certainly wasn't out looking to find another man. But it was a good arrangement at first, and I wound up living with Oscar for 14 years. I had nine pregnancies with him. But I am still alone and single...

'Look, I won't speak badly about Oscar. He treated me and the children well at first. He didn't drink and he was faithful to me. He never abused me or the children. At first we lived in a little mud hut near the top of the Alto do Cruzeiro. After a few years Antonieta helped us to get a good COHAB (state-subsidized) house close to hers on the Alto de Independência. Those were good times for us. They were never better, and we might have been living there still if Oscar hadn't gotten it into his head to try making an even better life for us in São Paulo. Tia and Mama and Antonieta tried to talk us out of it, but Oscar was determined. He had a brother living in São Paulo, and his brother sent word for us to come and join him there. His brother said that there was good work at high wages and a better place to live and bring up our children. He said that we could make our way in São Paulo and that it was where everything was happening. Bom Jesus was a backward place, a place for *motatos*. The future, he said, was in São Paulo.

'I never much liked being a "wife", but I loved being pregnant... I had 15 pregnancies, and if I hadn't got so disgusted with men I would have had 15 more.'

'So against everyone's objections we sold our COHAB house and we took up a collection for our bus fare. But what misery lay waiting for us in São Paulo! We had been completely deceived by Oscar's brother. We arrived exhausted and hungry after days riding the bus, only to find that his brother lived in a filthy, crowded hovel far, far outside the city. His neighborhood was an ugly and violent shantytown. The local police were killing people at liberty. There was no protection for the poor. The buses into the city were crowded and dangerous. There was no room for us to live and no work to be found. The children became sick with fevers and 'flus. I thought we would all die of cold. At night our teeth rattled in our heads from such cold that I never knew existed in this world, let alone in our Brazil.

'I started to lose my mind. I suffered from a nervous attack that almost cost me my life. I finally had to send word to Mama begging her to forgive me and asking her to arrange the money for a return bus fare, or else we would be dead within the month. Tonieta sent the money for me and the children. After I came home, Oscar soon followed me. We tried to put our life back together again on the Alto do Cruzeiro, but it was never the same. We had lost so much, and neither one of us had the energy to start over again. Oscar started to drink, and everything began to go downhill. He took up with another woman. Before long Oscar had two families on the Alto do Cruzeiro...

'This continued for several years, with each of us complaining about the other woman and insisting he let one or the other go. And finally he did. On the night of São João in 1986, the night of the barn fires and square dances, Oscar came home early and in a bad mood. He ordered me to pack up his belongings in a satchel because he was finally leaving me for his other woman. Then he took his pick of the children, our two healthy sons, to help him in the fields and our beautiful, fat Patricia. He left me with the rest, the two, worthless older girls, Xoxa and Pelzinha, Carolina, the skinny middle girl and Mercea, my hopeless last born, who has never been well a day in her life.

'I became hysterical and I yelled: "Why are you doing this to me now?". He said to my face: "Because you have turned into a *caroa,* a toothless old hag. You are used up, and you're not good for anything anymore." I was so revolted by him and by what he did to me that I began to take it out on the children. I told them I hated them because they were his and that looking at their faces reminded me of the abuse I had suffered at his hands. But the more I abused the children, the more they stuck fast to me.

'There are times, Nancí, when I think I can't stand it anymore. I tell the children: "If you bother me, if you ask me for one more thing that I can't possibly give you, I am going to pack up your clothes in a tight little bundle and send you off to live with your papa and his other woman. Let him take care of the whole lot of you!" But they are so attached to me. The little one never lets me out of her sight. Mercea hangs onto my skirts and she cries whenever I leave the house. I can't take a step without her. What kind of children are these, so afraid to move without their mama? So I yell at them to toughen them up. I say, "Hell, you are eating me up alive! When I die they are going to have to make me a very large coffin so I can carry you all along with me!"

"What does the future hold? My life will be more of the same. My only fear is that I will die a pauper on the streets, neglected and abandoned *à míngua*, with no one to bury me. That would be a fitting end to the life of Biu!'

The tears had begun to form at the corner of Biu's eyes. But just as suddenly as they came, Biu banished them away. She roughly wiped her eyes with her charcoal-sooted hands, making herself look for all the world like a coal miner. Reflecting suddenly on the days of *carnaval* ahead, Biu jumped up, hitched up her skirt and showed the crowd of small children gathered in front of her door a lively frevo step. Soon her antics – sticking out her tongue, shaking her behind, pushing her false teeth out of her mouth – had her children splitting their sides with laugfhter. She gave me a wide and mischievous grin.

In concluding the account of her life history, Biu refused to let it end on a sorrowful or desperate note. She came close up to my face, so close I could smell the faint scent of dried fish and *celantro,* as salty and bitter as tears. But Biu would not have it that way.

'No, Nancí, I *won't* cry,' she said. 'And I won't waste my life thinking about it from morning to night. My life is hard enough. One husband hung himself and another walked out on me. I work hard all day in the cane fields. What good would it do me to lie awake at night crying about my fate? Can I argue with God for the state I'm in? No! So I'll dance and I'll jump and I'll play *carnaval!* And yes, I'll laugh, and people will wonder at a *pobre* like me who can have such a good time. But if I don't enjoy myself, if I can't amuse myself a little bit, well, then, I would rather be dead.' ■

'Can I argue with God for the state I'm in? No! So I'll dance and I'll jump and I'll play *carnaval*!'

The madness of *mingau*

The infant mortality rate on the Alto do Cruzeiro could be cut by half if the staple infant food *mingau* (porridge made from manioc flour, sugar and powdered milk) were replaced by breast feeding.

When I first lived on the Alto 25 years ago the only available powdered milk was supplied freely under the US Food For Peace program. These handouts, which I myself helped to distribute, eventually fostered a powdered-milk dependency which Nestlé and other companies later took advantage of when free distribution ended.

Today it would take a miracle to dislodge the practice of artificial infant feeding. The weekly purchase of powdered babymilk is a chronic anxiety on the Alto. It is the single most expensive food purchase made by young families and consumes about a fifth of their weekly income. In the central *supermercado* in Bom Jesus the display of infant formula took up a full aisle, more than any other food product.

Nestlé shelved in Bom Jesus

Alto mothers still use the breast as an initial supplement to *mingau,* which is made of such thick consistency that it is often finger-fed the newborn. (Maternal colostrum is rejected as 'dirty' and is manually extracted and thrown away.) Their stomachs full of *mingau,* it is not surprising that so many infants spurn the breast when it is offered. In a few days mother's milk fails as infants are not put to the breast often enough to build up the milk supply. And women then explain they are unable to breastfeed because of insufficient milk.

If they want to survive at all the mothers of the Alto must work. In the transition from semi-subsistence peasants to wage laborers food becomes a commodity to be purchased rather than grown on one's rented garden plot. So infant food is easily seen as a pre-packaged commodity as well. In the desperate situation in which many Alto women find themselves, bottle-feeding is really the only possible 'choice'.

What has been lost through the commercialization of infant feeding is the whole 'culture' of breast-feeding. Breast milk is a powerful metaphor speaking to the scarcity and bitterness of their own lives. 'If we feed them,' said one woman, 'they would make us sick and skinny and old.'

BRAZIL - INFANT MORTALITY - THE FACTS

The sharp divide

The past 30 years have seen a slow but marked improvement worldwide in the number of children surviving beyond their fifth birthday. In 1960, out of every 1,000 children born in Brazil 181 died before the age of five; by 1992 the number had been reduced to 65. But the differences between countries are sharp; between regions in the same country they can be sharper still; in Brazil they are among the sharpest in the world.

Zona da Mata
PERNAMBUCO
Recife

Sharper still

Things have not been getting any better for the people of Brazil, Bom Jesus or the Alto.

•

Interest payments to service Brazil's foreign debt increased threefold between 1982 and 1985, while social expenditure dropped. Food prices rose as minimum wages fell; the burden of the debt fell on the poor.

•

Family income in Bom Jesus fell by one-third between 1982 and 1987, from an average $24 per week to just $16. Seventy five per cent of family income in the Alto is spent on food.

•

The younger generation of Alto women (aged between 19 and 39) lost almost twice as many of their children before their first birthday as the older generation.

•

In 1989, 96 per cent of all child deaths in the Alto were infants in their first 12 months of life.

Brazil in the world [1]

Cuba is the only Latin American country with a low under-five mortality rate – the result of a child survival campaign. About a quarter of all infant deaths in Latin America are in Brazil. In 1992, according to official figures, 236,000 Brazilian children aged under five died – one every two minutes.

Under-five mortality rate (per 1,000 live births 1992)	
Ireland (lowest in the world)	6
US	10
Cuba	11
Argentina	24
Brazil	65
India	124
Niger (highest in the world)	320

The Northeast in Brazil

The Northeast is Brazil's poorest region.

- Infant mortality here reaches levels similar to those in many parts of Africa and India.
- More than half of all child deaths in Brazil take place in the Northeast.
- The under-five mortality rate in the Northeast is officially 116 deaths per 1,000 births, almost double the national average.

Bom Jesus in the Northeast

Bom Jesus (a pseudonym for a town in the *Zona da Mata* inland from Recife) is in one of the poorest regions of the Northeast. In Bom Jesus in 1987:

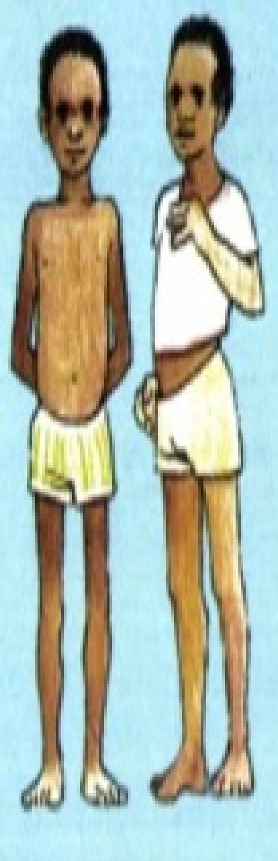
- 722 children were born and 340 died, of whom 322 were under five.
- The under-five mortality rate was 211 per 1,000 live births – the same as in Somalia in 1992.
- Child deaths account for a large proportion of all deaths – 38 per cent in 1987.

The Alto in Bom Jesus

Nancy Scheper-Hughes interviewed the mothers of 255 children who had died in the Alto, the poorest part of Bom Jesus, to discover what they thought had killed their children.

Most thought it was poverty (often manifesting itself in chronic diarrhea), lack of food, dirty water and worthless medical care. Immunization and oral rehydration therapy can save a child once, but not over and over again if the basic necessities are lacking.

Cause	***Number***
Diarrhea/vomiting and other related complaints	71
Measles, smallpox, pneumonia and other infectious childhood diseases	41
Doença da criança (doomed child syndrome, various subtypes)	39
Fraquenza (weakness, wasting)	37
Pasmo, susto (fright, shock and other malignant emotions)	14
Dentição (malignant teething)	13
Diseases of skin, liver, blood	13
De repente (sudden death)	9
Mal trato (conscious if unintentional neglect)	6
Resguardo quebrado (lying-in precautions broken)	5
Castigo (divine retribution)	4
Cause unknown to mother	3
Total deaths:	**255**



She also surveyed 72 women in the Alto – covering three generations aged between 19 and 76 – about their experience of pregnancy, childbirth and child care. On average, every mother had 4.2 children who survived beyond their fifth birthday – and had lost 3.6 living children.

	Total	***per woman***
Pregnancies	688	9.5
Children surviving to age 5	308	4.2
Miscarriages/abortions	93	1.3
Stillbirths	16	0.3
Infant deaths (birth–1 year)	208	2.9
Child deaths (1+ – 5 years)	47	0.7

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[1] *State of the World's Children 1994, UNICEF*, this section only. All other material is taken from Nancy Scheper-Hughes, *Death without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1992.

Carnival and forgetting

Bom Jesus should provide an ideal setting for the role reversals of the annual carnival. In practice the festivities do the dirty work of class, gender and race divisions.

The 'Dames' have it all – macho at home and strutting at *carnaval.*

I LEFT Biu's house after our talk and caught up with the street dancers. The wealthy families of the big houses played *carnaval* in the privacy of their vacation homes on the coast or in élite social clubs in Recife. They never showed their faces for the duration of the festivities. The middle classes emerged briefly on the street on Friday night, the eve of the official start of the festival. Then they, too, left town.

By the next day, Saturday, the real start of the festival, virtually every wealthy and middle-class family had left Bom Jesus da Mata, taking their bands, their elaborate *fantasias* and (as Little Irene wryly put it) 'their prestige' with them. The only concession to the poor who were left behind was an old, teetering, wooden sugarcane transporting truck that was left on the main *praça* of the town with a single loudspeaker.

'Where is everyone?' the people asked. *Carnaval* is meant to put the poor in the 'center' of the street and the rich on the sidelines, admiring and clapping wildly for their favorite dancers and costume performers. But the rich had disappeared.

The poor of the Alto do Cruzeiro descended from the hill to dance in the streets without a samba band. Men dressed in ragged, makeshift costumes as street beggars and as abandoned women holding sick and hungry infants. Abandoned street children 'organized' themselves into *blocos de sujos* (groups of dirty ones), their ripped clothing and faces smeared with ashes and motor oil.

I finally went to the home of Seu Biu de Caboclos, the leader of the only organized *bloco* on the Alto, named the Caboclos Tupinambá. They were preparing to descend the Alto and parade through the town. Biu's *bloco* was 'well turned out', in matching satin shirts, sashes and Indian skirts, with elaborate headdresses sporting red peacock feathers.

Seu Biu took a few moments away from his elaborate ritual of face painting to explain: 'I am responsible for the costumes, the feathers, the paint, the bows and arrows, the bells, the drums and the flags. Without me, nothing happens. I will play only if beautifully adorned and well practiced. To play in an ugly or disorganized way isn't worth the bother. I won't do it. If people won't come to practice, or if they arrive later and already drunk, they are out of my game. No exceptions.'

Seu Biu's wife, Gabriela, pregnant with her ninth child, listened to her husband's explanation with a pained smile on her face. 'Do you play *carnaval*?' I asked her in jest. The shy young woman found this an impossibly funny question and she laughed, shaking her head.

Carnaval is said not only to liberate the body but the female body in particular. In Bom Jesus I saw, on the contrary, a *carnaval* largely designed for the pleasure of men and boys. The 'female' was liberated but only in male bodies or for the purpose of titillating male fantasies of sexual abundance and erotic abandon.

On Saturday afternoon two large *blocos* finally made their appearance in downtown Bom Jesus, and both were organized around sexual and gender themes. The first was formed by the prostitutes of the *zona*. Town women kept a respectful distance. They waited and watched for the group to appear along the elevated railroad tracks several streets away from the *zona*. The group emerged dressed as sexually alluring 'Gypsies', and they lined up behind their rhinestone-studded and embroidered felt banner with its legend 'The Disgusting Gypsies'. Whistles and catcalls accompanied their appearance. They offered no reversal and certainly no threat to the everyday violence of sexual and racial politics in Bom Jesus da Mata. Nonetheless, once the seductive music and dancing began, the 'Gypsies' led a charismatic *bloco de arrastão* (dragnet) that attracted a large and enthusiastic crowd.

The role of those women who do participate in *carnaval* is to undress not to cross-dress.

The second *bloco*, made up of working-class men, some single, some married, some heterosexual, others gay or bisexual, paraded as transvestites calling themselves the Vedetes ('Dames'). Male cross-dressing *vedetes* are a central component of *carnaval* play. But the fantasy is one-sided. Women rarely, if ever, cross-dress in *carnaval*. The role of those women who do participate in *carnaval* play is to undress, not to cross-dress.

In Bom Jesus the transvestite 'Dames' offered a counterpoint to the public sexuality of the 'Disgusting Gypsies'. The Dames presented themselves as female coquettes; coy, demure, modest and shy. Dressed in wide-brimmed hats, veils and long-hooped skirts with wide petticoats, the Vedetes bobbed, curtseyed and tiptoed before their spectators. *Carnaval* custom prevented the 'Dames' from defending themselves against unwanted sexual advances. They were expected to behave as perfectly docile and receptive sexual objects.

***Carnaval* dissolves order and rationality into chaos and nonsense.**

In a way these working-class men can have it all: macho and dominant at home and demure and strutting at *carnaval*. No wives or girlfriends accompanied these dancers. In one case a young school teacher prevailed upon her fiancé to drop out of the *bloco* out of respect for their engagement. 'It may be about women, but it has nothing to do with me,' she said. 'All my fiancé has to show for it at the end of the festival is a bad hangover and a ridiculous, sweat-stained dress.'

Carnaval players spin on an axis of inversions and reversals of high and low, order and disorder, male and female, inside and outside, public and private, freedom and repression, life and death. *Carnaval* dissolves order and rationality into chaos and nonsense; it tumbles the lofty as it celebrates the humble, absurd and grotesque. Both the erotic and the maudlin, sexuality and death, are present at *carnaval*, so that destruction and regeneration are merged in the absurd *carnaval* cry '*Viva a morte!* Long live death!'.

If the everyday world is structured by the metaphor of the struggle in which suffering, pain and sickness mark one's passage through time and space along the path that leads inevitably to death, then once a year *carnaval* ruptures this linear and tragic trajectory. The relentless, punishing straight line of the everyday is symbolically and actually breached by the dizzying, dancing circle of samba revelers, who spin round and round in their wide skirts, and by *frevo* dancers, who leap up and down going nowhere at all. The everyday struggle evaporates in the wide open, enfolding embrace of the *carnaval* ball dancers who, arms outstretched, call all things to the center and to themselves.

The ideology of *carnaval* hints at a brave new world, a world of pleasures and many different freedoms. The 'vale of tears' gives way to a world of laughter and forgetting, a world of happiness and joy. The workaday, adult world gives way to the child's world of fantasy and play. And so one 'plays' and 'jumps' *carnaval*. One 'plays' and 'toys' with the body and its many eroticized parts.

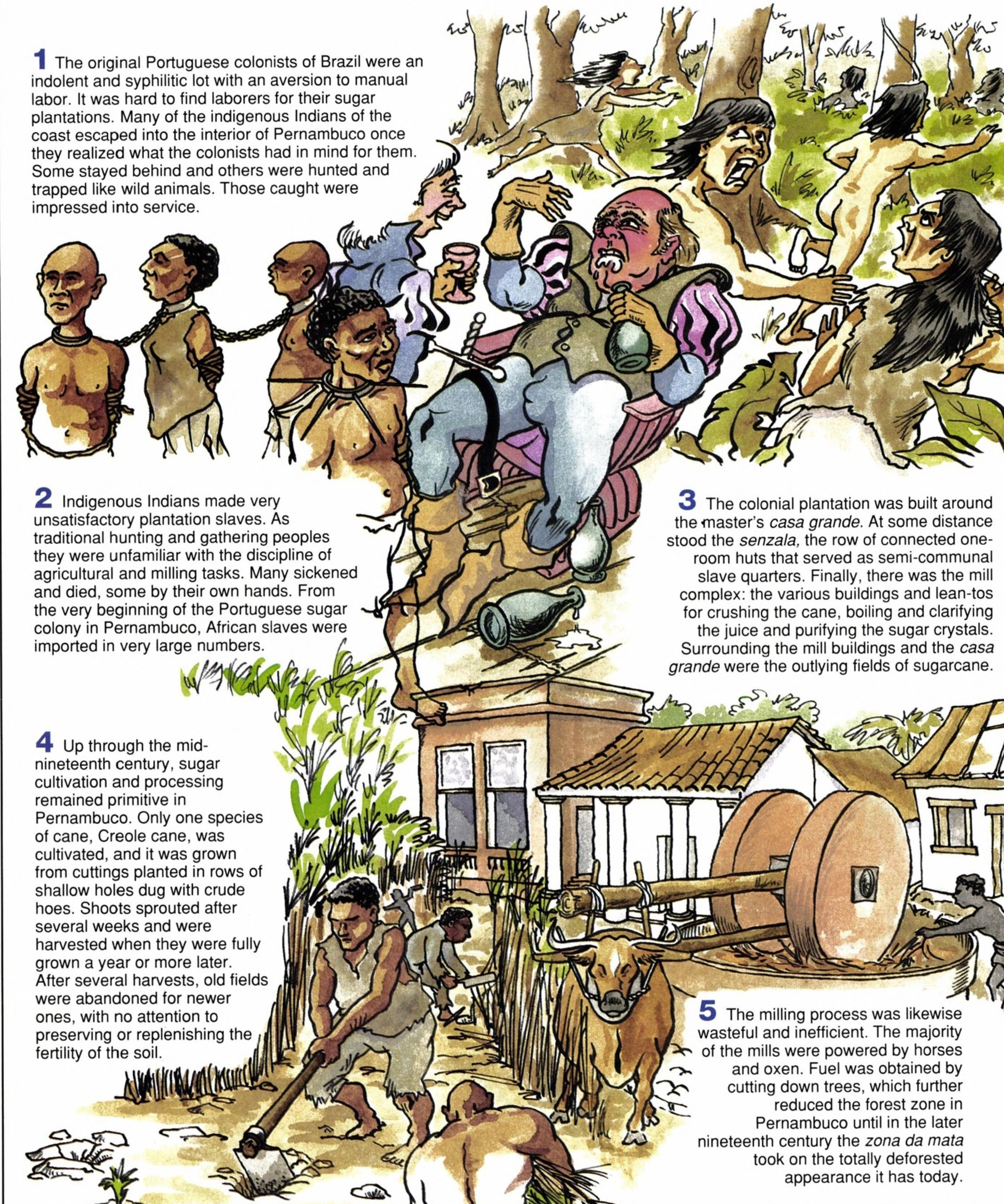
Above all, *carnaval* is 'dirty', mixing above and below, front and behind, inside and outside, water and mud, motor oil and honey, semen and excreta. And it is full of surprises. Even while throwing themselves into the spontaneous joy and abandon of the festival, their *carnaval* 'play' can also do the dirty work of class, gender and sexual divisions. By means of grotesque exaggeration these divisions are etched even more deeply into the individual and collective bodies. ■

Kids on the block get ready to play their way through *carnaval*.

brilux
Posto Sta Maria

Simply... working for sugar

It took the Portuguese colonists a while to discover that they could make money from sugar in Pernambuco by shipping it off to Europe. Once they had, no-one's life in the region would ever be the same again.



1 The original Portuguese colonists of Brazil were an indolent and syphilitic lot with an aversion to manual labor. It was hard to find laborers for their sugar plantations. Many of the indigenous Indians of the coast escaped into the interior of Pernambuco once they realized what the colonists had in mind for them. Some stayed behind and others were hunted and trapped like wild animals. Those caught were impressed into service.

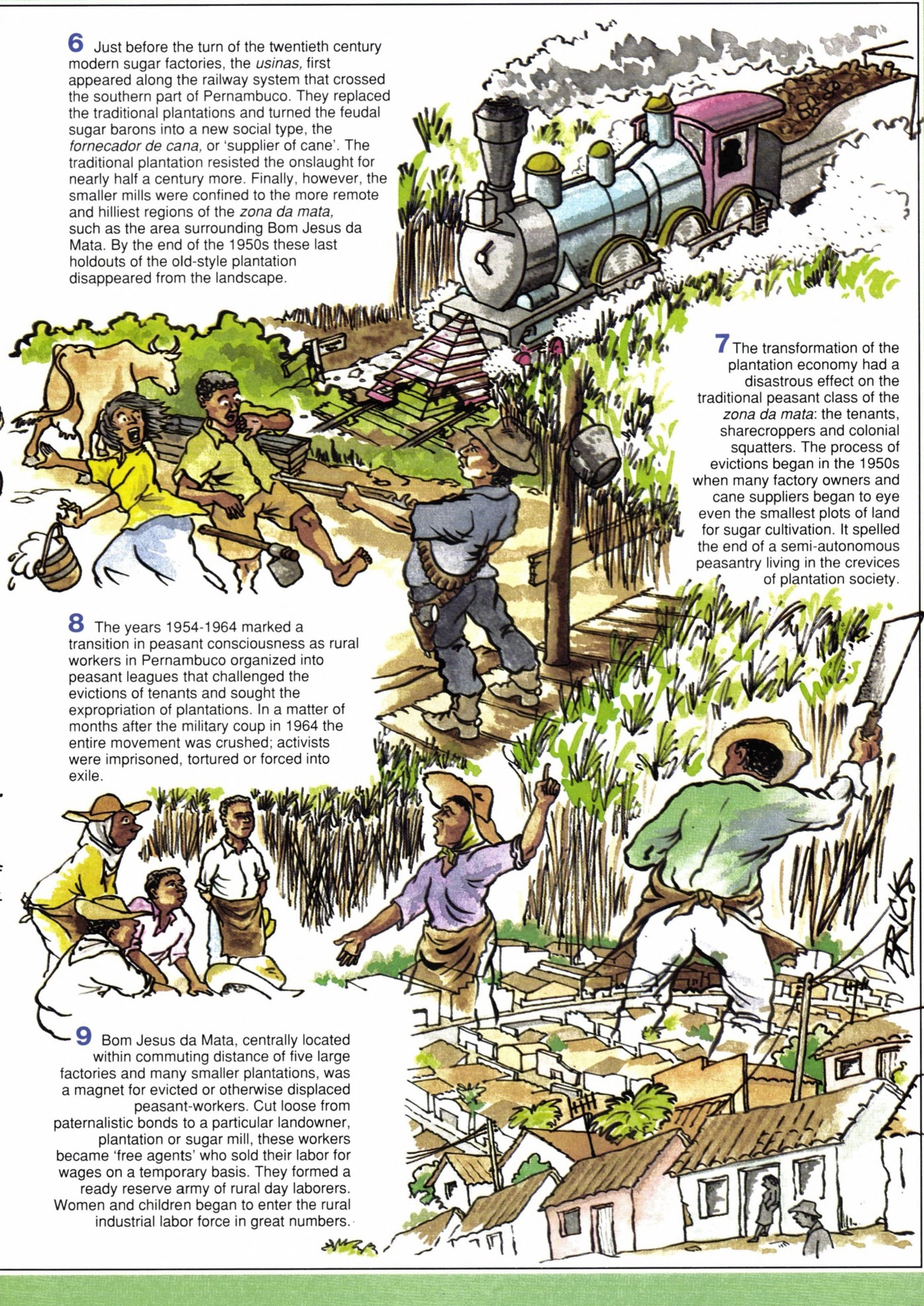
2 Indigenous Indians made very unsatisfactory plantation slaves. As traditional hunting and gathering peoples they were unfamiliar with the discipline of agricultural and milling tasks. Many sickened and died, some by their own hands. From the very beginning of the Portuguese sugar colony in Pernambuco, African slaves were imported in very large numbers.

3 The colonial plantation was built around the master's *casa grande*. At some distance stood the *senzala,* the row of connected one-room huts that served as semi-communal slave quarters. Finally, there was the mill complex: the various buildings and lean-tos for crushing the cane, boiling and clarifying the juice and purifying the sugar crystals. Surrounding the mill buildings and the *casa grande* were the outlying fields of sugarcane.

4 Up through the mid-nineteenth century, sugar cultivation and processing remained primitive in Pernambuco. Only one species of cane, Creole cane, was cultivated, and it was grown from cuttings planted in rows of shallow holes dug with crude hoes. Shoots sprouted after several weeks and were harvested when they were fully grown a year or more later. After several harvests, old fields were abandoned for newer ones, with no attention to preserving or replenishing the fertility of the soil.

5 The milling process was likewise wasteful and inefficient. The majority of the mills were powered by horses and oxen. Fuel was obtained by cutting down trees, which further reduced the forest zone in Pernambuco until in the later nineteenth century the *zona da mata* took on the totally deforested appearance it has today.

ILLUSTRATION / BRICK



6 Just before the turn of the twentieth century modern sugar factories, the *usinas,* first appeared along the railway system that crossed the southern part of Pernambuco. They replaced the traditional plantations and turned the feudal sugar barons into a new social type, the *fornecador de cana,* or 'supplier of cane'. The traditional plantation resisted the onslaught for nearly half a century more. Finally, however, the smaller mills were confined to the more remote and hilliest regions of the *zona da mata,* such as the area surrounding Bom Jesus da Mata. By the end of the 1950s these last holdouts of the old-style plantation disappeared from the landscape.

7 The transformation of the plantation economy had a disastrous effect on the traditional peasant class of the *zona da mata*: the tenants, sharecroppers and colonial squatters. The process of evictions began in the 1950s when many factory owners and cane suppliers began to eye even the smallest plots of land for sugar cultivation. It spelled the end of a semi-autonomous peasantry living in the crevices of plantation society.

8 The years 1954-1964 marked a transition in peasant consciousness as rural workers in Pernambuco organized into peasant leagues that challenged the evictions of tenants and sought the expropriation of plantations. In a matter of months after the military coup in 1964 the entire movement was crushed; activists were imprisoned, tortured or forced into exile.

9 Bom Jesus da Mata, centrally located within commuting distance of five large factories and many smaller plantations, was a magnet for evicted or otherwise displaced peasant-workers. Cut loose from paternalistic bonds to a particular landowner, plantation or sugar mill, these workers became 'free agents' who sold their labor for wages on a temporary basis. They formed a ready reserve army of rural day laborers. Women and children began to enter the rural industrial labor force in great numbers.

The spirit-child

No-one blamed Biu for being out enjoying Carnival when her daughter Mercea died.

Of my three closest friends, Antonieta, Lordes and Biu, only Biu made an effort to play *carnaval*, though I did not meet up with her in the streets. Like her I soon got lost, swallowed up in the crush of bodies that followed the 'Gypsies' and the 'Dames' up and down and around the length and breadth of Bom Jesus.

The next time we met, *carnaval* was over and we were hurriedly assembled at the home of Antonieta to prepare little Mercea's body for burial. She had died of pneumonia on her way to the hospital the night before. Biu was in a state of shock at the death of her child. Pelzinha had eloped, run off with her 15-year-old boyfriend. Xoxa, Mercea's older sister and surrogate mother, was still away working on a banana plantation. Lordes was too preoccupied with her husband's accident to respond to the call to her niece's wake. A few of her children were sent in her place. Antonieta took charge of the preparations.

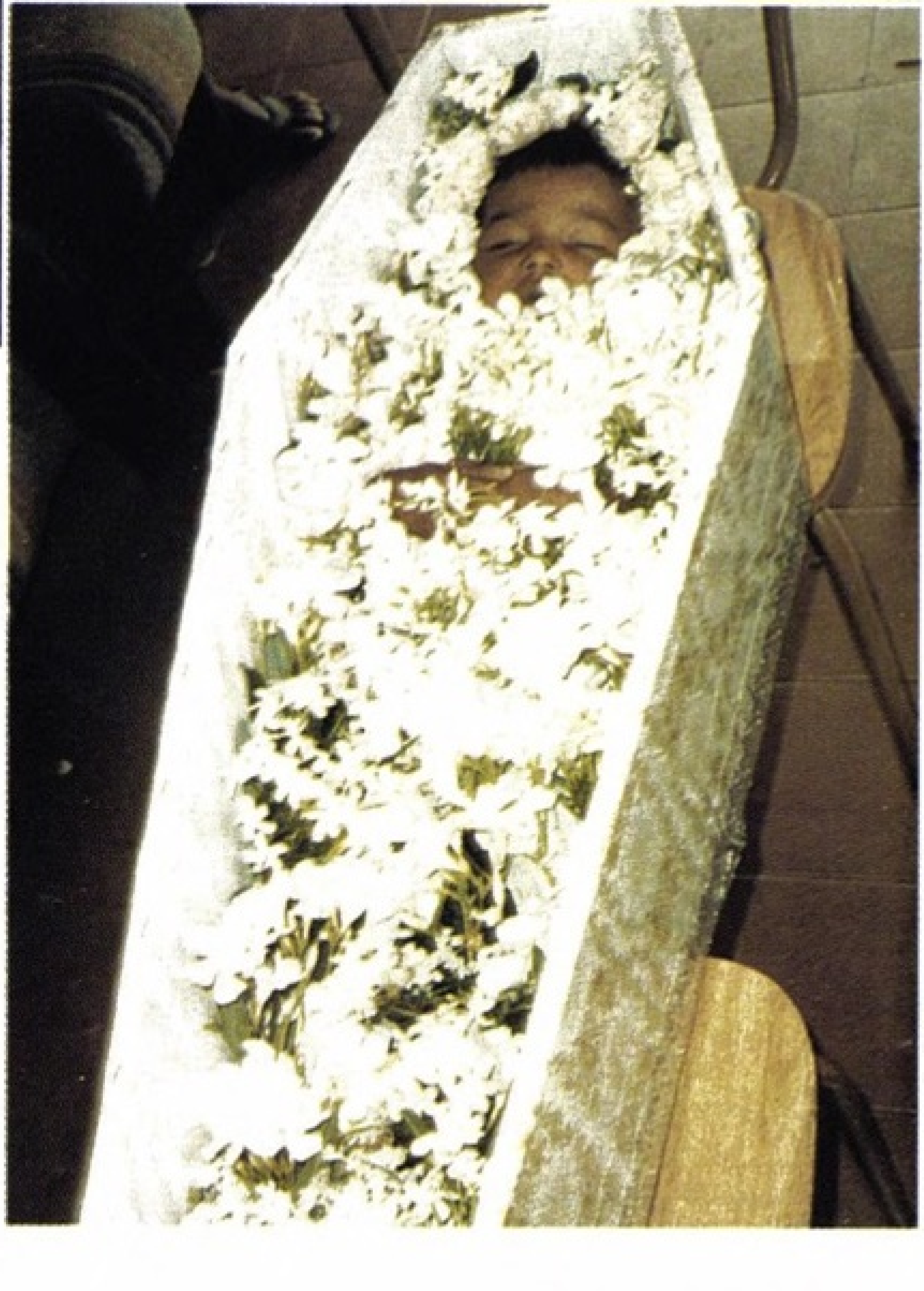
The question that was foremost on everyone's mind that day was 'Why did Mercea die?'. Was it because Xoxa was away from her small charge? Was it because the child was never 'well attended' in the local hospital and municipal clinic? Was it because the *remédios* purchased at Feliciano's pharmacy were the wrong ones? Was it because the municipal ambulance was just a little too late, the driver still groggy from playing *carnaval* the night before? Or was it because Mercea never really had a knack for life?

But at least no-one blamed Biu. They affirmed her right to *brincar* and *gozar*, to take some small pleasure in the life of the festival.

With Oscar, Pelzinha and Mercea gone from her life, Biu fell onto particularly hard times. She began to drink and she stopped eating. Food 'tasted like dust', she complained. She spent some time hospitalized with a severe attack of *nervoso*. Finally she cut her long hair, trimmed and painted her fingernails and took a job as a live-in domestic in Recife.

Biu's runaway daughter, Pelzinha, eventually came home and gave birth to a beautiful little baby girl with straight, dark hair. I put a gold *figa* around her wrist for protection. When Xoxa returned home from the plantation she grieved deeply. It specially bothered her that her sister was buried without stockings. For several weeks Xoxa was awakened by apparitions of Mercea hovering over her cot pointing to her bare feet.

Some time later Xoxa purchased a pretty pair of white stockings from a stall at the open-air market, but when we reached the cemetery we could no longer locate Mercea's grave. It had been cleared and the space reused by an unlucky pair of twin infants. Mercea's remains were thrown into the bone depository at the west wall of the cemetery. I comforted the weeping Xoxa, reminding her that Mercea was now a spirit-child and that Xoxa could bury the stockings in a small mound next to the bone depository where Mercea could easily find them. ■



Sisters in grief at Mercea's funeral: 'beautiful fat' Patricia (top) and surrogate mother Xoxa (bottom right).

SEBASTIAO SALGADO / MAGNUM

The **cleansing** fire

Existence, not resistance, is celebrated by the people of the Alto do Cruzeiro. But dreams of Utopia have not been abandoned and there are breaches in the culture of silence.

LIKE others in Northeast Brazil the people of the Alto remain skeptical of radical solutions to their problems. And not without cause. They have suffered a long history of popular uprisings, armed struggles, messianic movements, anarchist fantasies and Peasant Leagues – all of them crushed. In addition, two decades of military government have driven the point home. Now, for the most part, people can be depended on to police, silence and check themselves.

Consequently, they do their best to survive in the cracks and crevices of daily life in Bom Jesus da Mata. 'Silence is protection,' my friends on the Alto are wont to say. 'Whoever says nothing has nothing to fear.' Even community leaders often counsel each other to 'take the path of least resistance' when they confront opposition from the local élite to their modest plans for improving the shantytown.

The traveling *repentista* singers in the marketplace keep alive the memory of heroic bandits, rebel priests and defiant cowhands of the Northeast. But even as they sing the praises of traditional folk heroes, the *repentistas* usually strike a note of caution, warning against acts of open defiance.

The people are influenced by the weight of their own history. They assume human nature is flawed, and they are not surprised when their own leaders turn against them if the rewards for doing so are great enough. 'In the end,' former Peasant League activist Zé de Mello told me sadly, 'our heroes always desert us.'

For the most part Alto residents are patient, long-suffering and non-violent. They are gentle in the face of the aggression of local bosses, with their hired thugs and gunmen. However, their nonviolence and reluctance to challenge the powerful do not mean they passively accept the situation in which they are trapped. Though there is much that separates them, the poor are still united by a common destiny and a shared social identity.

Their street parties and spontaneous gatherings are the celebrations of a collective social body. And the people of the Alto make merry as often as they can: the more *festas* the better. All it takes on a lazy Sunday afternoon is a transistor radio, a few bottles of Coca-Cola, a daub of cologne and one's sandals kicked off, all the better to dance.

They also understand and freely comment on the evils of the local political economy, using the traditional folk-Catholic idiom of the seven deadly sins. Little escapes their devastating, running critique of human culpability, in particular the greed, pride, lust and sloth of their political bosses and of the planter class. It is a tradition that has been greatly expanded in the work of 'liberation theology' and its humanistic Marxism.

When Padre Agostino Leal arrived in Bom Jesus in 1981 he brought with him this new interpretation of the Gospel. First he closed the modern chapel in the Franciscan convent which had been used by the wealthy of Bom Jesus for private prayer and exclusive liturgies. All masses were made public and held in the dilapidated main church, Our Lady of Sorrows. And all parishioners were expected to share the same pews.

Little escapes their devastating, running critique of human culpability.

The Mass was transformed too: the liturgy was in the simple dialect and idiom of the rural workers. Hymns were addressed to 'Our Lady of the Oppressed' and 'Our Lord of the Workers'. The Offertory and Thanksgiving prayers asked for clean water, fair wages, food to fill hungry stomachs and rain for the traditional squatters' gardens.

This new 'theology of the poor' has also brought 'workers' Masses' and 'liberation missions'. On the last night of one such mission the priest led a procession to an empty field for a celebratory bonfire, the roaring fire that was to cleanse the community of its social ills. Each person was to bring a stick of dried sugarcane, with each stick to represent a social ill – hunger, sickness, illiteracy, exploitation, paternalism, racism.

That night, one by one, the people of the Alto came forward, each tossing a stick into the fire, some cursing the sugar bosses and the mill managers. Others came forward to throw half-used bottles of medicine into the flames, saying they had been fooled by the doctors and pharmacists of Bom Jesus. Children burned blank pages of notebooks from local schools where 'the children of the poor were taught nothing at all'.

'Who are the chosen people of God?' asked the priest.

'We are,' answered the crowd, 'the poor and the humble'.

'Who are the sinners?'

'The landowners, the mill owners, the plantation owners.'

Today this 'popular religion' is one way the poor of Bom Jesus dare to criticize their oppressors and dream of Utopia, a new world where all wrongs will be righted and 'where the first shall be last and the last shall be first'. In rituals like these the culture of silence begins to be breached and the poor can begin to relearn the everyday practices of personal and, eventually, political freedom.

'Today, I spoke at the women's circle in the creche,' an elderly woman told me proudly. 'Later I realized it was the first time I had ever spoken out in public. I was always someone who kept quiet and accepted whatever was said. But I learned today that I do have an opinion even though I was raised not to be a person.'

Writing about institutions of fear and domination in the culture of Bom Jesus has been a delicate balancing act. I have tried to acknowledge the destructive signature of poverty and oppression on the individual and the society as a whole. But I've also tried to underline the creative and often contradictory means the people of the Alto use to stay alive – even to thrive – with their wit and their wits intact. The goal of the poor of the Alto do Cruzeiro is not *resistance* but simply *existence*. And in the context of these besieged lives I find human resilience enough to celebrate with them, joyfully and hopefully, if always tentatively. ■

SOCIEDADE
AGRÍCOLA E PECUÁ-
RIA DOS PLANTADO-
RES DE PERNAMBUCO

ANDREW ST. GEORGE / MAGNUM

**Crushed by the military:
Peasant League leader Francisco Juliano.**

Speaking **truth** to **power**

To conclude her story ***Nancy Scheper-Hughes*** *(pictured below) takes issue with academia and argues that seeing, listening, touching and recording can be acts of fraternity, sisterhood and solidarity.*

THE mood of contemporary anthropology is somber. Its practice and poetics are guided by a complex form of pessimism rooted in anthropology's tortured relationship to the colonial world and its ruthless destruction of native lands and peoples. This remains so even as anthropologists branch out to study the lives of peasant and urban peoples more like 'ourselves' in the West.

Because of its origins as mediator in the clash of competing cultures in the colonial world, anthropological thinking is radically conservative, suspicious of all proposals promoting social change, progress, development, modernization and the like. Anthropologists know in a very intimate way how often such schemes have been used against traditional, non-secular and communal people who happen to stand in the way of Western cultural and economic expansion. We dare not intrude. We can hardly help becoming involved in the lives of the people we have chosen to be our teachers, but our personal accountability to the 'other' must never be compromised.

Anthropological thinking is radically conservative, suspicious of all proposals promoting social change.

Many young anthropologists, sensitized by the writings of Michel Foucault on 'power/knowledge', have come to think of the anthropological interview as similar to the medieval 'inquisitional confession' through which church examiners extracted 'truth' from their naive and 'heretical' peasant parishioners. One hears of anthropological observation as a hostile act that reduces our 'subjects' to mere 'objects' of our incriminating, scientific gaze. Consequently some young anthropologists have given up the practice of descriptive ethnography altogether.

Nonetheless my own work is both active and committed. Anthropology exists both as a field of knowledge and as a field of action. Anthropological writing can be a

site of resistance. We can disrupt expected roles in the spirit of the 'carnavalesque'. We can exchange gifts based on our labors, use royalties to support radical actions and to subvert the process that puts our work at the service of 'the machine' – in this instance the scientific, academic factory.

My particular sympathies are transparent. I do not try to disguise them behind the role of an invisible, omniscient or presumably 'neutral' third-person narrator. Rather, I enter freely into dialogues – and sometimes into conflicts and disagreements – with my teachers, challenging them on their views just as they challenge me on mine.

As a 'critical medical anthropologist' I am something of a pathologist of human nature, drawn to illness, both individual and collective, as these shed light on culture, society and their discontents. The view through this lens is skewed, for I am slicing, dissecting and holding up to the light the diseased tissues of the social body gone awry. The anthropologist-diviner names ills, human passions and weaknesses, distortions in human relations, all of which can produce suffering, sickness and death. But with an eye toward social healing I conclude with a search for the paths of resistance and liberation in Northeast Brazil.

I grow increasingly weary of 'postmodernist' critiques. Given the perilous times in which we live I am inclined toward a compromise, one that would call for the practice of a 'good enough' ethnography. We cannot rid ourselves of the cultural self we bring with us into the field, any more than we can disown the eyes and ears and skin through which we take our intuitive perceptions about the new and the strange world we have entered. We struggle to do the best we can with the limited resources we have to hand – our ability to listen and observe carefully, with empathy and compassion.

I believe there is still a role for the ethnographer-writer in giving voice to those who have been silenced, as have the people of the Alto by political and economic oppression, and their children by hunger and premature death. There is still value, I believe, in attempting to 'speak truth to power'. Not to look, not to touch, not to record can be the hostile act, an act of indifference and turning away.

Not to look, not to touch, not to record can be the hostile act, an act of indifference and turning away.

I would like to suggest an image of the modern ethnographer as the 'clerk of the records'. The clerk of the records listens, observes and records the minutia of human lives. She can be counted on to remember key events in the personal lives and in the life history of the community, to 'keep trust' and not betray confidences shared in private. The good clerk knows the history of the community. She is its genealogist. Because of her privileged presence at births, deaths and other life-cycle events she can readily call to mind the fragile web of human relations that bind people together. She must know when to speak and when to keep silent. She is a keeper of the records, a minor historian of the ordinary lives of people often presumed to have no history. In Northeast Brazil there are many lives and even more deaths to keep track of, numbering the bones of a people whom the State thinks hardly worth counting at all.

Not everything can be dissolved into the vapor of absolute cultural difference and radical otherness. There are ways in which my Alto friends and I are not so radically 'other' to each other. Like them I instinctively make the sign of the cross when I sense danger or misfortune coming. Also, like some of them, I sit in the back of the Church and mock the visiting Bishop when he arrives outrageously decked out in scarlet silk and lace, calling him a parrot, a peacock and a transvestite *Baiana,* an 'overdressed Afro-Brazilian food vender'. But when the same Bishop-shepherd raises the staff in his perfumed hands I'm on my feet with the rest; head bowed, fingers crossed, I take on Pascal's wager and put my faith in God... with the rest. ■

Perilous times for women 'at the foot of the cane' in Bom Jesus de Mata.

SOUTH AFRICA

Change in the 'new South Africa' comes slowly but surely for women abused into servility by Apartheid.

Foot in the door

Domestics fight servility and the sack

MARGARET NHLAPO has a tough job as a South African Domestic Workers Union (SADWU) organizer. She covers Germiston and neighbouring white working-class towns outside Johannesburg, which are strongholds for the extreme right wing.

'I think people are taking revenge on domestic workers,' she says, referring to increased violence against them. She recalls the woman who visited the Union office, terrified that her employers wanted to kill her, though she had no firm evidence. Some weeks later she was found shot dead in the street. Margaret has scores of reports of rapes during 1993, but a combination of the victims' terror and lack of police interest means that the culprits always get away. She worries about the vulnerability of domestics to intimidation as the election campaign hots up.

The dawn of the 'new South Africa' is bringing changes, albeit slowly. The Basic Conditions of Employment Act affords domestics limited statutory protection for the first time and is seen by the union as a 'foot in the door'. The SADWU office in Cape Town reports regular calls from more enlightened or image-conscious employers, checking out the Act's implications. Other bosses have greeted the legislation with a wave of dismissals. In Natal SADWU says hundreds of their members have been sacked – and the Union's membership represents only a tiny fraction of this atomized workforce.

'Employers are frightened. They don't know what the act means,' says Bonisiwe, a SADWU organizer in Durban. 'But on our side it is just nothing,' she adds. 'Hours are still too long. They say twelve hours a day; we say eight hours. They say five and a half days a week; we say five days. We also need a Wages Act and a monthly minimum of 500 rands (about $150). The average here is probably about 250 rands.'

Banking genes

The US Secretary of Commerce has claimed an exclusive patent monopoly over genetic material from a Guaymi woman from Panama. Her blood was taken without her consent at a Panama hospital in 1990. The US continues to pressurize countries of the South to agree to the patenting of all life forms, while insisting that 'life forms' refers only to plants and 'non-human animals'.

The US Government currently has 160 acquisitions of human origin awaiting patent claims. Widespread collection from humans is occurring in Columbia. A highly funded US-based organization, the Human Genome Diversity Project (HUGO), set up to map human genetic structure, has identified around 700 'endangered' indigenous groups of people and is collecting gene samples from them.

Overview 49

The fight for a minimum wage will probably sharpen if the election of an ANC-dominated government increases popular expectations. It could also lead to still more sackings.

'People should pay for the hours they can afford,' replies Laura Best, from Black Sash, the human-rights organization. She says the character of domestic work is changing. Fewer whites are employing servants to enhance their status and fewer domestics are employed on a live-in basis. 'Most newly-built houses in the suburbs don't even have servants' quarters,' she says.

This view is shared by Florie de Villiers, SADWU's national president, who hopes lost jobs will be replaced through the new Government's reconstruction programme. She also acknowledges that the union has had a particular problem dealing with domestics who are employed by black families, and are often especially badly paid. 'Domestic workers must have the same protection as all other workers,' she insists.

There are signs that many are abandoning a long tradition of servility. Organizers of a recruitment drive by the ANC's Johannesburg East Branch report that domestics are signing up in droves. ■

John Hunt

CONSERVATION

CAMERA PRESS

Tempting trinkets come from log-sized chunks in the Painted Desert. Guilt-stricken trophy hunters are sending them back.

On the rocks

Theft from the Petrified Forest

THE Painted Desert in Arizona is one of the world's largest treasure chests of petrified wood. Formed 225 million years ago the wood has become a semi-precious stone with the impregnation of silica in logs over time. One of the largest logs is nearly 11 metres long and weighs almost 40 tons.

Polished segments of petrified wood have startling, crystal-like patterns with spectacular colours and can be turned into a range of objects from earrings to paperweights. A chunk the size of a loaf of bread can fetch several hundred dollars.

The plunder of this desert treasure – which has been going on since early this century – has reached crisis proportions. A recent study in demarcated areas showed that 16,439 kilos of petrified wood disappeared – about 1.6 kilos for every visiting car.

Nearly one million people from all over the world visit the Petrified Forest every year. Rangers encourage them to watch a film about the origins of the forest, patiently addressing each audience with the conservation message. The entire perimeter of the park has been fenced and 'mined' with motion detectors. At park exits vehicles are spot-checked by an armed ranger. Fines for stealing the wood start at $275 for a few ounces.

But superstition seems to be the best way of stopping the haemorrhage. About three packages a week of returned wood are received by rangers accompanied by a guilt-stricken letter.

'Kept in the glove compartment of van, which got into an accident. Then my sister stayed with us and fell and I had to pay the medical bills. I think it's the rock,' says a typical letter displayed in the park museum. Another admits: 'I am writing this in hopes of easing my conscience and saving the most important thing in my life, my marriage. I hid the bits in my bra and my husband keeps telling me it was theft and a very un-Christian thing to do. I am afraid that because of it my marriage is on the rocks.'

Another writer goes through a catalogue of misfortune: 'Some time ago on a family trip through the Petrified Forest I made the grave mistake of taking a rock in direct defiance of posted signs and laughing silently. Since that fateful day I lost my job, the pipes in my house exploded, my wife was in an auto accident, and I was hospitalized with a bad back and began losing hair. Our first child was born prematurely and is still not potty trained.'

But the power of guilt is best demonstrated by this excerpt: 'I read some of these letters and I went out and got into the car and put all the wood back... except one little chip. Now I realize that one little chip does make a difference. I am sending the chip back.' ■

Geoffrey Johnson / Gemini

BIANCA CASTILLO / CAMERA PRESS

The colour of money

'Environmentally-conscious' consumers in the rich world have created a growing niche market for organic and naturally-coloured cottons. The latter varieties came about as a result of five thousand years of agricultural experiments by indigenous communities in Central America. Along comes an entrepreneur like Sally Fox who gets her seeds for dyeing free from a collection held by the US Department of Agriculture, tinkers with them for a few years and slaps patents on two coloured varieties - brown and green - which don't differ significantly from the varieties she started off with. She has the legal right to exclude others from selling her varieties, or reproducing, importing or exporting them without permission. So should a Central American farmer request some of the seeds from a seed bank, the request would have to be turned down.

Rafi Communiqué

TRADE

Nutmeg cracked

Glut devalues 'retirement tree'

GRENADIANS don't have pension funds; they have nutmegs. The tree takes a long time to mature, but then produces prolifically for at least a century. All the farmer has to do, so the theory goes, is wait for the nutmegs to fall down and take them to market.

Over 7,000 farmers in this Caribbean island of 90,000 people produce nutmegs, most on small plots. As befits the nutmeg's nickname – the retirement tree – the average age of these producers is between 60 and 70. Younger Grenadians are not drawn much by agriculture and are leaving the island at the rate of 2,000 a year.

PHILIP WOLMOUTH

Pension funds no longer in the bag.

Nutmegs traditionally provided a steady income. Most were exported at a reasonable price to Germany and the Netherlands, and the farmers could expect a modest pre-Christmas bonus from the Grenada Co-operative Nutmeg Association.

Not any more. The current price the farmers receive is 30 Eastern Caribbean cents (about 10 US cents) per pound, the worst for 25 years. In 1989 it was five times more. The Co-operative is about $3.75 million in the red and had to borrow money from the Government to pay the farmers anything at all last Christmas.

The culprit, says Grenada, is Indonesian structural adjustment. Indonesia produces about 75 per cent of the world's nutmegs and exports mostly to the US. Grenada, the 'spice isle', produces the rest. In 1987 the two countries got together, formed a nutmeg cartel, agreed to fix export volumes and prices and saw their earnings take off. But in May 1990 the Indonesian Government restructured the country's producer group, removed its export monopoly and ditched the cartel. The official line was that cartels had no place in a deregulated economy where market forces were at play.

The Grenadians took another view. They accused US spice importers and the US Government of pressuring Indonesia to drop the cartel in order to gain access to an International Monetary Fund credit package.

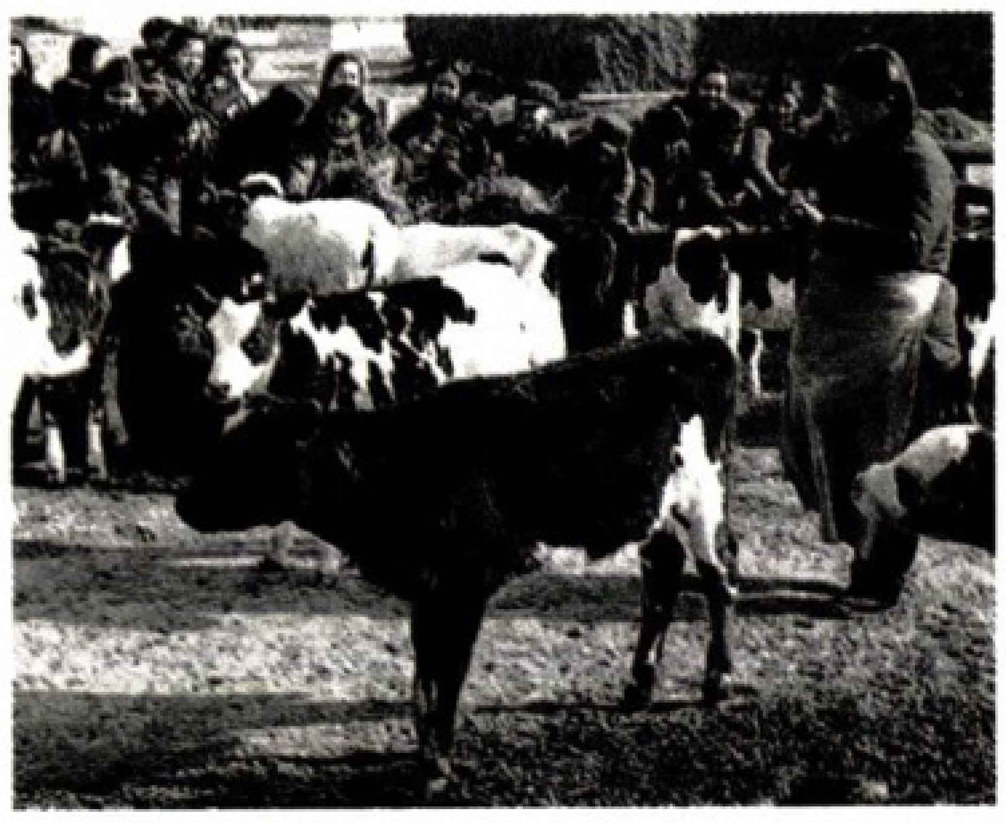
With the agreement gone, Indonesia flooded the market and prices plummeted from $7,000 a ton to $2,000 within a year. Delighted commodity brokers were no longer faced with a minimum price policy and could play the two countries off against each other. And with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 Grenada lost an important market.

The nutmeg crisis has led to desperate measures. Thousands of tons of surplus stock have been burned in a bid to restore prices. There has been talk of uprooting the 'retirement tree' to make way for non-traditional exports like soursop and breadfruit. Grenada's depressed rural communities are suffering serious hardship; prices for bananas and cocoa have also declined steeply. Liberalization, it seems, has cracked the nut and put an end to Grenadian farmers' dreams of a comfortable old age. ■

James Ferguson / Latin America Bureau

Nestlé woos China

With concerned consumers agitating against its mercenary peddling of baby-milk formula, the Swiss multinational Nestlé keeps searching out new pastures. The latest is China, where it is still relatively unknown. It has sent a pair of agronomists to encourage coffee cultivation among the Dai tribe in the mountainous southern Chinese province of Yunnan. And in the far northern province of Heilongjiang, Nestlé has jump-started a dairy industry.


CAMERA PRESS

Currently 6,000 local farmers provide milk for the company. Average herd size: 1.2 cows. Each day now Nestlé Dairy Farm offers tastes of sweets, instant coffee and other products to more than 10,000 consumers throughout China. It's pushing for brand recognition by sponsoring television talent searches and painting competitions. Students in Canton's classrooms use Nestlé-provided materials on the importance of a good diet and the need to brush and floss teeth.

Far Eastern Economic Review vol 157 no 1

A hope and a snip

A Chinese woman, acting on the advice of a soothsayer, cut off her husband's penis while he slept, in the belief that he would grow an improved one that would restore their marriage, officials reported in an article on crimes of superstition in the northern province of Heilongjiang.

The Guardian 19 January 1994

Poor credentials

In a parliamentary exchange South Africa's President F W De Klerk attacked Tony Leon from the Democratic Party (DP) for not understanding the nature of poverty in the country. 'He (Leon) never played on a farm with young blacks as I did. None of them (DP MP's) were really ever friends with blacks as we who grew up that way were. We understand the masses of South Africa. The DP does not.'

Tony Leon was quick to counter attack with the disclosure that he too 'ran barefoot with the farm children every December holiday from the age of eight to eleven'.

South African Labour Bulletin vol 17 no 6

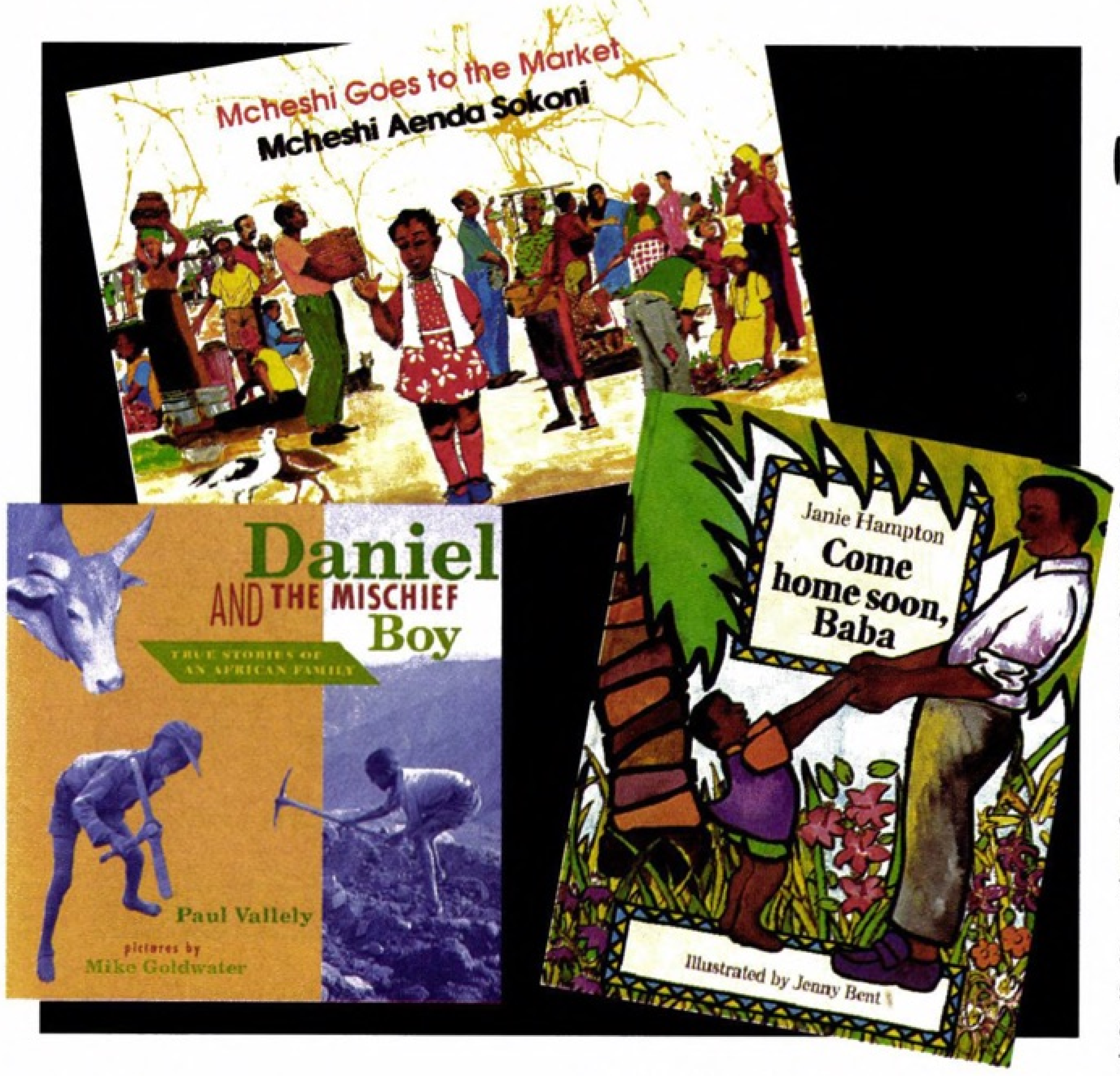
CAMERA PRESS

END

END Quote

Let me be free – free to travel, free to stop, free to follow the trade where I choose, free to choose my own teachers, free to follow the religion of my father, free to think, talk and act for myself, and I will obey every law or submit to the penalty...

Hin-mut-too-wah-lat-kekht / Chief Joseph
Nez Rerce, Native American


Mcheshi Goes to the Market
Mcheshi Aenda Sokoni
Daniel AND THE MISCHIEF Boy
TRUE STORIES OF AN AFRICAN FAMILY
Paul Vallely
pictures by Mike Goldwater
Janie Hampton
Come home soon, Baba
Illustrated by Jenny Bent

books

Mcheshi goes to the market

illustrated by **Nicholas Sironka, Judy Wanjiku Mathenge, James Okello and Martin Otieno** (Jaracanda Designs Ltd, Nairobi)

Come home soon, Baba

by **Janie Hampton** (Blackie Children's Books ISBN 0 216 94019 2)

Daniel and the Mischief Boy

by **Paul Vallely** with pictures by **Mike Goldwater** (Fount/Christian Aid ISBN 0 00 627675 X)

There are very few books for children which present life in Africa in ways they can understand. All too often children are left to interpret Africa through the images of starvation and poverty that they see on TV. So these books are a refreshing change. **Mcheshi goes to market** is a colourful book, beautifully illustrated by four Kenyan artists. With both English and Swahili text, it takes the reader straight into Mcheshi's life as she asks: 'Do you want to come with us?' From then on the reader follows Mcheshi through an outing to the market, buying a shirt for her brother and hiding from her mother.

Politics ☆☆☆
Entertainment ☆☆☆☆

Come home soon, Baba also takes a direct approach, tracing the feelings of the child, Blessing, when his father has to go away to work. Blessing's father – or *Baba* in Shona, a Zimbabwean language – promises to be back by the time the chicken's eggs hatch and we follow Blessing's anticipation as he helps his family make bricks for a new room.

Blessing likes the feel of mud on his toes – what child does not? – and the cool clear water of the river as he splashes in it. Finally, the eggs hatch and Baba returns. A story that's simple, but real.

Politics ☆☆☆☆☆
Entertainment ☆☆☆☆

Daniel and the Mischief Boy is real in a different way. Mike Goldwater's excellent colour photographs accompany the story of Daniel, a little boy who is not afraid of ghosts or the Monster Monkey. Daniel and his family live in Eritrea, and the book traces the scrapes that he gets himself into as he takes the ox to water or lands on his bottom in a cactus plant.

This book does not shun the harsh realities of Daniel's life but at the same time it manages to catch the fun of being a 10-year-old boy – anywhere in the world.

Politics ☆☆☆☆
Entertainment ☆☆

These books can be purchased through **Letterbox Library, 2nd Floor, Leroy House, 436 Essex Road, London N1 3QP, UK. Tel (71) 226 1633. Fax (71) 226 1768.**

film

Schindler's List

directed by **Steven Spielberg**

When the man who brought world audiences ET, Jaws and Jurassic Park announced that he was going to adapt Thomas Keneally's book **Schindler's Ark** for screen, many demurred. How could Hollywood's ultimate myth-maker tackle the true story of Oscar Schindler, the opportunist German Catholic businessman who saved 1,100 Jews from the Nazi Holocaust by buying them and employing them in his utensils factory?

Schindler's List does find Spielberg in exceptionally solemn mode. He has produced an arresting film that cannot fail to disturb, not least because it recreates terrible scenes of the atrocities meted out to the Jews. Using his supreme skill at entertaining, Spielberg draws the audience into that gruelling era of history, and holds our attention for the film's three hours.

Like many of his films it is preoccupied with good and evil – and its arbitrariness. There is a sense in which Schindler slips into the role of hero, just as a Nazi soldier might have 'slipped' into the role of murderer.

The fact that it is shot in black and white gives **Schindler's List** an art-house edge, alluding to the documentary footage from the period but also reminding us that it is a feature film. But is it right to recreate scenes from the Holocaust? The debates around the film are similar to those around Holocaust museums in Washington and Los Angeles which use theme-park-style interactive effects to recreate the experience of death camps.

So how does one preserve the memory of events of such significance, particularly when fascism is on the rise again? Perhaps it is indicative of our culture that there can no longer be education without entertainment.

Schindler's List will attract audiences who have not seen the monumental documentaries on the Holocaust: Marcel Ophul's *The Sorrow and the Pity*, Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* or Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog*. Spielberg has made an emotionally powerful film, but its real strength is in the issues it raises and the debates it provokes after viewing. So go and see it – and talk about it.

Politics ☆☆☆
Entertainment ☆☆☆

music

Ayé

by **Angelique Kidjo**

(Mango/Island 518432 CD/LP/MC)

Benin's diva of afro-funk could not have chosen a more apposite word with which to title her third solo album. In her native Fon language, *ayé* refers to life's beginning. There are always new beginnings and that Kidjo's album underpins funky soul sounds with traditional rhythms only reaffirms this quality of *ayé*.

Kidjo has journeyed to the funky heartland of our times: much of the album was recorded at Prince's studio in Minneapolis. The result is a heady mix of African and Afro-American beats.

Ayé's 10 songs are clear and stylish, and the dance numbers are capable of filling the most leaden shoes with helium.

Schindler, slipping into a hero's role.

PIERRE GAYTE

Kidjo: A lithe, controlling spirit.

But it is Kidjo's voice that stands out as most extraordinary. From the opening growl of *Agolo* to the sweet invocation to the priestess of voodoo which closes the album, her range is always rich and versatile. Soaring above up-tempo numbers like *Adouma* (which translates as 'Come and get it!') she hovers like a lithe and controlling spirit.

The music is assertive and so are the lyrics, with a focus on the world. Singing in Fon and Yoruba - translated into French and English on the album sleeve - she tackles homelessness, racial conflict and environmental concerns. Even the more stereotypical subjects like love and pain are approached with a difference: 'You feel like an alien in this world,' she sings in *Idje Idje*, building a gentle tune into a thing of stirring intensity, with a belting soul chorus, bass, horns and a piano line to kick the song into orbit. Its model could be a classic Motown, reshaped by direct contact with Africa.

Other genres are also invoked on this album. A loose, reggae-inspired beat flexes through *Tombo* and some of the fiery sax work seems inspired by Washington's go-go bands. But **Ayé** always maintains a strong sense of its own identity, driven by an African heartbeat. This is a fine achievement, of interest to dance enthusiasts and fans of world music alike. Tipped in many corners as a musician capable of breaking into the Western markets in a big way, Angelique Kidjo seems to be on her way. With **Ayé** her arrival is only a matter of time.

Politics ☆☆☆
Entertainment ☆☆☆☆

STAR RATING	
Excellent	☆☆☆☆☆
Very good	☆☆☆☆
Good	☆☆☆
Fair	☆☆
Poor	☆

Reviews editor: **Vanessa Baird**

THE *classic*

Brazil

...being the film that has nothing to do with Latin America

WATCHING a recent rerun of a 1970s *Monty Python's Flying Circus* series proved to be a depressing experience for me. What I remembered as the radical cutting edge of satire and comedy proved to be a flabby concoction of dubious humour and undoubted sexism.

The only parts of the programme to withstand the ravages of time were the oddball animation sequences put together by Terry Gilliam.

Gilliam is probably best known for these freewheeling, anarchic cartoons although he went on to direct the Python movies and then to make his own feature films. His early attempts – *Jabberwocky* and *Time Bandits* – were patchy affairs occasionally inspired but uneven fantasies. But in 1985 Gilliam hit his stride and produced what I believe to be his masterpiece with his third film **Brazil**.

I'd better say right away that **Brazil** has nothing to do with Latin America, and the title – taken from the popular tune that appears throughout the film – is a typical piece of Gilliam whimsy. The film is in fact a futuristic dystopia, a curious amalgam of 1940s Britain – vacuum tubes, valve computers, huge groaning machines of doubtful efficacy – and a nightmarish totalitarian state. Bombs are planted by the security forces to justify a reign of terror and a pampered élite indulge in trivial pastimes oblivious to the sufferings of the majority.

BFI STILLS

The plot centres around a clerical error in which an order for the arrest (and 'disappearance') of one Tuttle, a rebel leader, is issued in the name of Buttle, a totally innocuous man who is duly sucked into the security apparatus and disposed of. Sam Lowry, a lowly bureaucrat played by Jonathan Pryce, attempts a belated reparation for the mistake; while his colleagues are more concerned with disclaiming responsibility, he goes to see the man's family. This act begins a chain of events which are to have dramatic and unforeseen consequences for Sam – he had previously been a closet rebel, confining his defiance to fantastic dreams of flying and battles with giant stereotypical enemies. Confronted with the evils of the system he has helped to run, his opposition becomes overt and he uses his knowledge to help Jill, a freedom fighter slated for the next roundup of subversives. The fragile and doomed love affair that blossoms brings Sam into head-on confrontation with the full power of the state.

Such a bald plot summary does the film no justice; in texture and detail it is like no other film I have seen. Crammed full of incident and layers of meaning, it is as perplexing and as susceptible to interpretation as the best literature – or perhaps this is just another way of saying that linear, logical plots have never been Terry Gilliams's forte! Either way, Hollywood could not make head or tail of it, studio executives discussed truncating the film to impose a false happy ending, exactly as had been tried with Orson Welles' *The Magnificent Ambersons*. This would have had the dual effect of cutting an excruciating but essential torture scene and of rendering much of the preceding film meaningless. Gilliam, like Welles, won his battle to keep the film intact and preserve his chosen ending.

Although the 'studio suits' saw it as terribly negative and downbeat, **Brazil** is in fact a warm, funny and humane film. Despite the crushing system, people engage, as they always do, in small but significant acts of subversion – such as Sam's office workmates switching their monitors to classic black and white films like *Casablanca* when their boss's back is turned. Meanwhile the aforementioned Tuttle, played by Robert de Niro, is an heroic freelance plumber who operates outside the bureaucracy of 'Central Services' – an illegal and foolhardy act of independence. It is a strange but liberating world-view in which fixing central heating is a revolutionary act!

Brazil is that rare thing, a dystopian vision that is not soured by pessimism and defeatism. Unlike Orwell's *1984* or Huxley's *Brave New World*, it is a work in which humanity is oddly enlarged and ennobled rather than crushed by the terrible struggle with totalitarianism. Sam's escape from the system is not suicide, nor acquiescence and acceptance of Big Brother. He has at least attempted to engage with the world on *his* terms and defeat in these circumstances is no disgrace.

I can't say that viewing this film clarified my thoughts on where you draw the line between sullen dislike of an unacceptable regime and positive action to hasten its downfall; Gilliam's vision doesn't easily lend itself to any 'party line' on such matters. This has led to charges of incoherence and flippancy towards oppression. I can only say that **Brazil** is one of the most uplifting and heartening films I've ever seen; grandiose, overblown, startling, rich in visual imagery, thought-provoking. Unafraid of failure through overreaching, it is a beautifully made hymn to the human longing for freedom and a hugely entertaining satire on the lengths to which our masters will go to stop us having it. ■

Peter Whittaker

Brazil *is directed by Terry Gilliam*

QUESTIONS

...that have always intrigued you about the world will appear in this, your section, and be answered by other readers. Please address your answers and questions to 'Curiosities'.

JONATHAN A. MEYERS / CAMERA PRESS

What is the correct name for the aboriginal people of North America?

Perhaps the questioner has in mind an equivalent to the term *Innuit,* used by the people widely known as 'Eskimos' when referring to themselves. The word Innuit means 'people'.

But there is no equivalent term for American Indians/Native Americans because, unlike the Innuit who by and large share one common culture and whose languages are closely related, the North American Indians of Canada and US have at least nine distinct cultural areas and eight major linguistic groups. So although the names of the Indian nations (the Illinois, Salish, Tlingit and Haida, for example) translate as 'the people' in just the same way as *Innuit* does, there is no one common name.

I have frequently come across indigenous representatives referring to themselves as 'Indian people'. Surely, if one is looking for the correct way to describe a people one should listen to how they refer to themselves. If they are happy to use the term themselves, why not use 'Indian'? Surely language is first and foremost about communication, not political correctness.

Ed Dovey
London, UK

Rather than 'Native American', the term more commonly used in the US is 'American Indian'.

C Briggs
London, UK

Why are Australians called 'diggers'?

'Digger' was the term used during and after the 1850s to describe the miners on the goldfields of Australia. In the First World War the word was adopted by troops from Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand involved in trench warfare. To an extent it replaced 'cobber' and 'mate' as a form of address.

In World War Two, 'digger' was revived and applied to soldiers of any rank. Today it is used as a sign of respect for all soldiers – especially the older 'diggers' – and the term is heard most frequently on Armistice and ANZAC days.

Nicholas Tewson
Northcote, Australia

Was Margaret Thatcher the first person to say 'there is no such thing as society'?

I suspect that a phrase implying this has been used since history began by those who find it convenient to believe this. In *The Mirage of Social Justice* Friedrich von Hayek ridiculed the concept of society. In other works he stated that the word 'social' has no real meaning. However, Jeremy Bentham wrote the following which predates Hayek by about 200 years:

'The community is a fictitious *body,* composed as though the individual persons who are considered as constituting it were its members. The interest of the community then is, what? – the sum of the interests of the several members who compose it.'

I remember that Conservative politician Douglas Hurd used the idea of society being the sum of individuals' interests in his attempt to justify Thatcher's little gem.

Jack Davis
Hayling Island, UK

AWAITING YOUR ANSWERS

Did Ringo really play the drums in *Strawberry Fields*?

Aidan McQuade
Tigray, Ethiopia

Do female animals have orgasms and, if so, how?

Jo Wright
London, UK

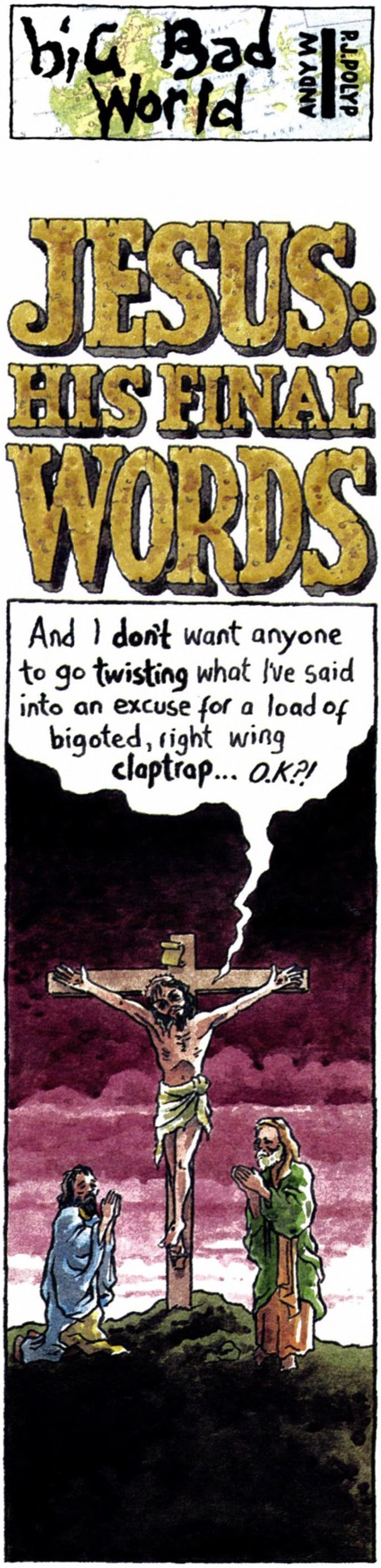
Can anyone tell me where I can find information about a drug called 'Filon' which was withdrawn by the National Health Service in Britain around 1974/5?

D Mills
London,UK

What are the pros and cons of microwaves? Are they more or less environment- and world-friendly than gas or electric stoves?

Andrew Young
Edinburgh, Scotland, UK

If you have any questions or answers please send them to Curiosities, **New Internationalist, 55 Rectory Road, Oxford OX4 1BW, UK,** or to your local **NI** office (see inside front cover for addresses).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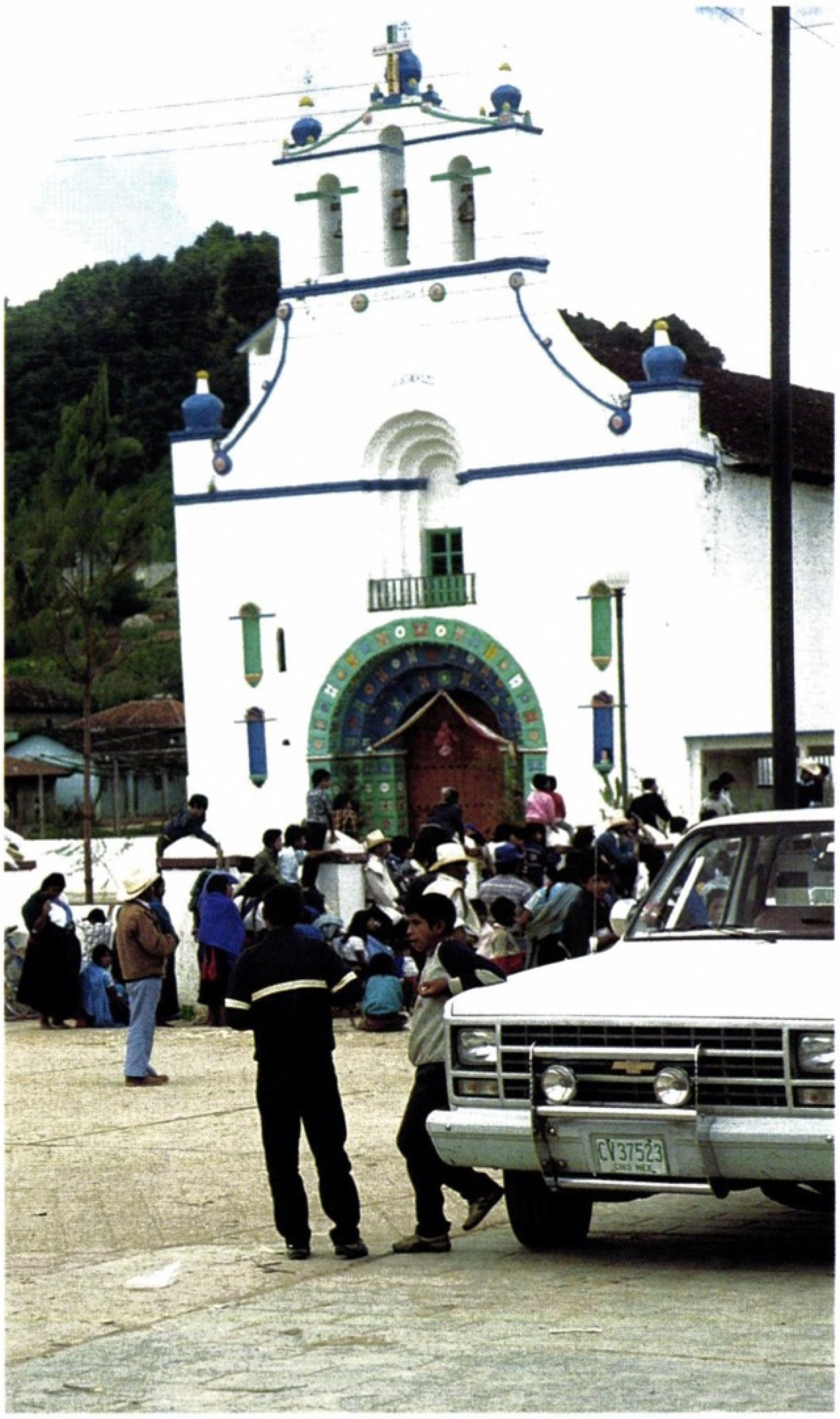
ANDY W
R.J.POLYP
JESUS: HIS FINAL WORDS
And I don't want anyone to go twisting what I've said into an excuse for a load of bigoted, right wing claptrap... O.K?!

The cry

by
Eduardo Galeano



DAVID RANSOM

Gathering crowds around the church in Chamula, Chiapas.

Portrait of Justice in Chiapas

In 1986, Mexican congressman Eraclio Zepeda visited the Cerro Hueco jail in Chiapas. There he met a Tzotzil Mayan Indian serving a thirty-year sentence for killing his father. By chance, Eraclio discovered that the presumably dead father brought his son food every day.

The Indian had been interrogated and tried in Spanish, a language he barely understood. And with the aid of a good beating he'd confessed to being the author of the crime they call 'patricide'.

Border of Countries and of Years

Armed with sticks, machetes and a few rifles, over a thousand Indians have risen up in the south of Mexico. The insurrection began in Chiapas, in the city that bears the name of Fray Bartolomé de las Casas. It occurred as 1993, the Year of Indigenous Peoples according to the United Nations, was dying. And it occurred as 1994, the year the Mexican Government claims the country will enter the First World, was being born.

What Border? What Country?

Any tourist who travels to Mexico's southern border can see that it is no more than a dotted line on a map. On either side, the Mexican and the Guatemalan, Indian land is populated by Mayans who speak the same languages, share the same customs and memories, and suffer the same scorn. But to go from one room to another in their vast home, they need passports.

In colonial times, Chiapas was part of Central America. In the nineteenth century it became part of Mexico by referendum. The Indians didn't even know about it. They couldn't vote. Now they can vote, but they still can't elect.

Two Exiles, No Kingdom

During the past decade, the Guatemalan generals pursued a plan of extermination. Four hundred Mayan villages were wiped out, and many thousands of Indian survivors found refuge in Chiapas: more than forty thousand under the protection of the United Nations, and who knows how many thousand at the whim of God.

The Mayans on the Mexican side were not victims of any systematic butchery, and comparatively speaking their situation was much better than Guatemala's tragedy. In the light of the flames of the recent rebellion, one might ask: Was it much better, or was it less worse?

The Majority is No Longer Silent

How many bombings, how many executions will it take to choke off this cry of desperation?

Like all the Indians of the Americas, the Mayans of Chiapas suffer the humiliation of incessant conquest. The communities of Chiapas, sacked a thousand times over the centuries, now face the annihilating stampede of the clear-cutters and Indian-hunters of the epoch of consumer society and the market economy; lumber and cattle corporations, assassins of forests and devourers of lands and hands.

Past and Present

Fray Bartolomé de las Casas was the bishop of Chiapas. When he arrived in 1545, the local gentry offered him a few coins from the Burial Fund as their only donation. And Fray Bartolomé soon confirmed that the Indians were treated as slaves, even if they had branded on their arms the word *libre*.

Times have changed, but even in our day many of the Indians of Chiapas are slaves of debt. If the local gentry have no need for their cheap hands, they would be pleased to send them to the cemetery or the museum.

In our day Fray Bartolomé's comment on the horrors he discovered still resounds: 'Doesn't God see them, even when they wear masks?' ■

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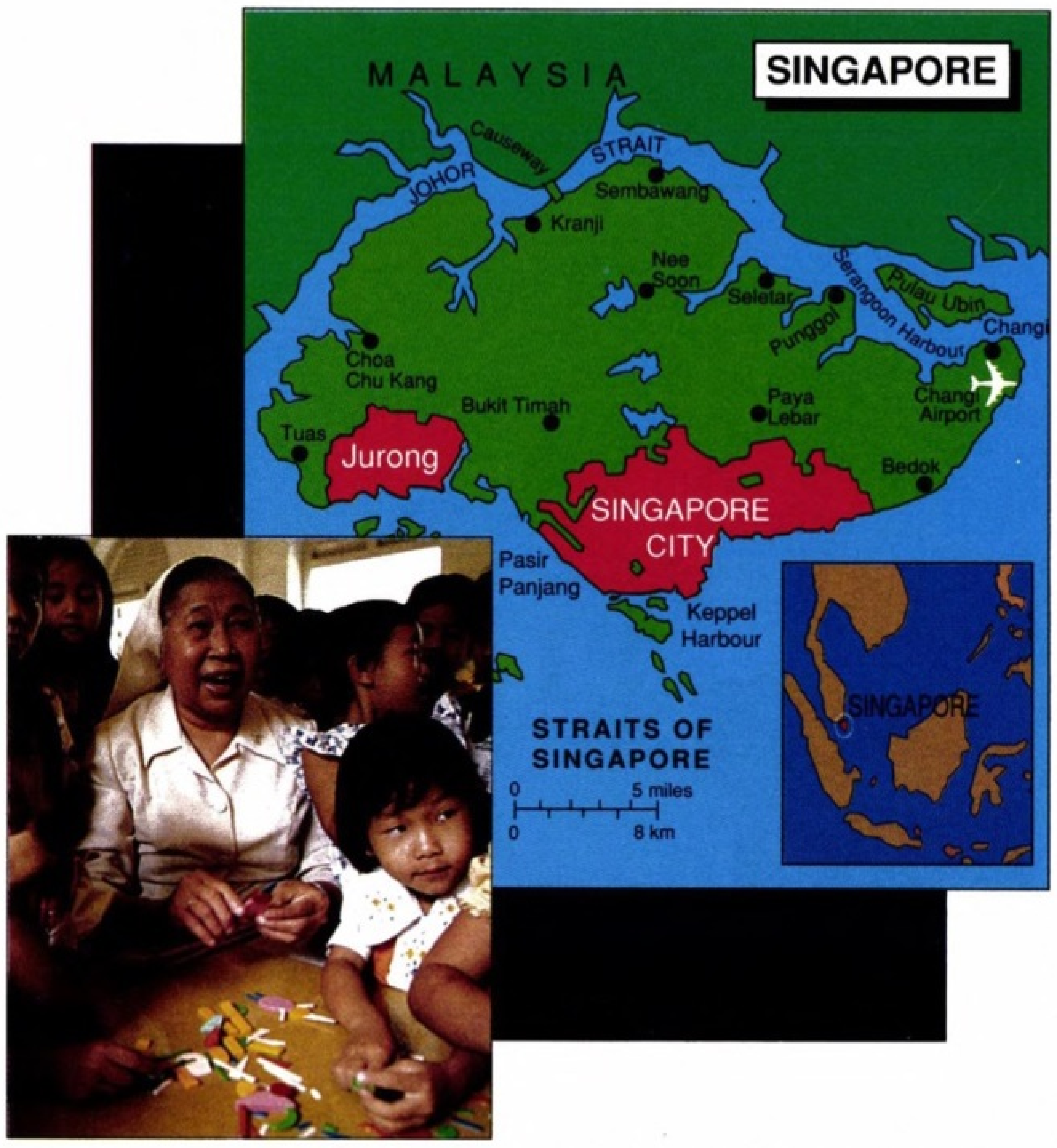
Singapore

SQUEAKY-clean Singapore prides itself on being a model of capitalism that works. In this sanitized Orwellian city-state, making money is definitely seen as more important than individual freedom. It is so heavily policed that the long arm of the law will reach you for not flushing a public toilet, for spitting or dropping litter.

Critics say Singapore would earn greater respect without its obsessive, nosy commandments which have obliterated much of its earlier Southeast Asian charm, replacing this with a modern but soulless society. Singaporeans however are confident that the future belongs to them, especially when rival regional economic competitor, Hong Kong, reverts to China's control in 1997. Many of Hong Kong's international investors have already shifted their headquarters to Singapore and more may do so post-1997.

Singapore enjoys relatively good relations with its closest neighbours Malaysia and Indonesia. Yet some people in this tiny, wealthy nation feel they lack enough military protection to defend themselves when sabres rattle.

But the cavalry is at hand. Following the closure of its military bases in the Philippines, the US found facilities in Singapore. Its strategic location on the Strait of Malacca is attractive to the US because much of the world's shipping (especially of oil) bound for Japan and eastern Asia passes through there.



CAMERA PRESS

Singapore's modern, well-scrubbed facade hides a seamier side. Human-rights organizations are concerned that about 1,000 people are imprisoned without charges under the Internal Security Act (ISA). The Government describes the detainees as gangsters and drug traffickers. Singapore has a mandatory death sentence for drug pushers and at least 37 people have been hanged for trafficking since 1975.

Ironically, the harsh drug laws have worried US military officials and Washington has pushed for its personnel to be exempt from the death sentence. The ISA is also used against anyone deemed a threat to national security. Critics say the Act suppresses normal dissent.

The Government meanwhile continues its censorship of the media but Beatles music and *Cosmopolitan* magazine may soon be allowed.

To outsiders Singapore presents a clean, sparkling city where everything seems to work. Tropical beaches, spacious green parks and glistening shopping malls attract visitors from all over the world. When tourism recently slackened off because of Singapore's reputation as a boring city, developers recreated the infamous Bugis Street which earlier spiced night life with its transvestites and other adventuresome attractions. The street was demolished in 1985 but was recently recreated, complete with the popular food stalls, cross dressers and other lures in the hope that tourists will return to its night markets ■

Richard S Ehrlich

AT A glance

Excellent ★★★★★
Good ★★★★
Fair ★★★
Poor ★★
Appalling ★

POLITICS
Democracy but People's Action Party holds virtual monopoly on power.
1983

INCOME DISTRIBUTION ★★★
Basic needs of most people are met.
1983 ★★★

LITERACY ★★★★★
90 per cent: reflects high government spending on education.
1983 ★★★★★

SELF-RELIANCE ★★★
Needs to import virtually everything, but flush with cash to do so.
1983 ★★★

FREEDOM ★★
Imprisonment without trial; strict censorship laws forbid dissenting views.
1983★★

POSITION OF WOMEN ★★★
Education has opened options but traditional ideas still powerful.
1983 ★★★★

LIFE EXPECTANCY ★★★★★
74 years for women, 68 years for men *(US 76 years).*
1983 ★★★★★

Leader Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong

Economy GNP per capita $14,210 *(US $22,240)*
Monetary unit: Singapore dollar
Main exports: Petroleum products, electronic components, TVs and radios, clothes and chemicals.
Main imports: Machinery and equipment, manufactured goods, foodstuffs and mineral fuels.

People 2.8 million

Health Infant mortality 6 per 1,000 live births *(US 9 per 1,000)*

Culture Mostly Chinese people with some Malaysians and Tamils. Predominantly Chinese culture with an overlay of sanitized popular Western icons. Formerly a British colony; occupied by Japan during World War II. Separated from Malaysia in 1965.
Religion: All major religions are represented.
Language: Bahasa Malaysia is the national language; Mandarin and Tamil also common. English is widely used.

***Sources**: The State of the World's Children 1994; The Asia and Pacific Review 1993/4; Asian Development Bank, World Bank, World Health Organisation, government statistics.*

Last profiled in February 1983

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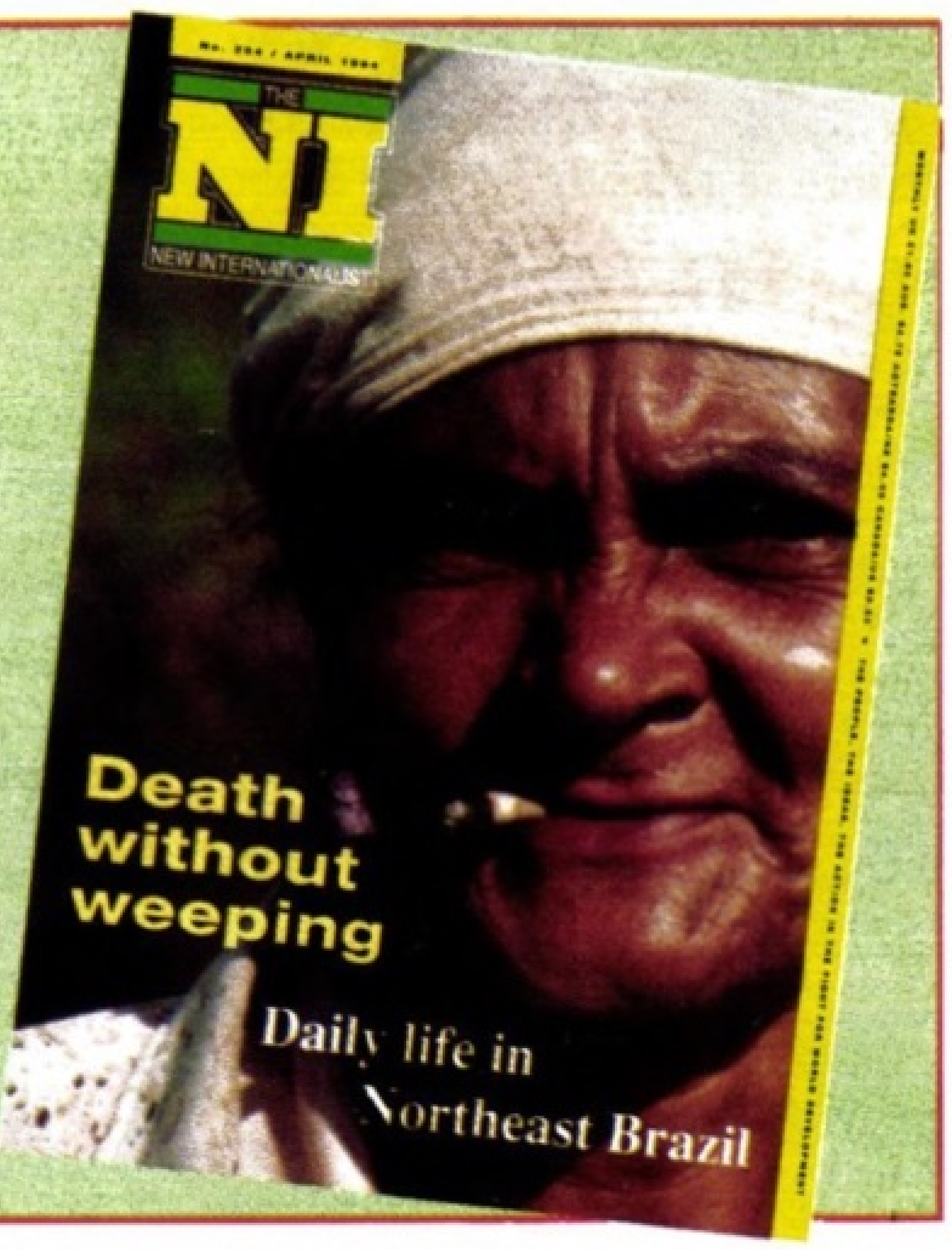

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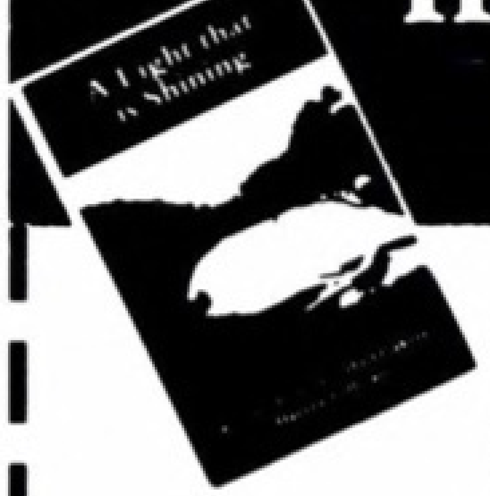

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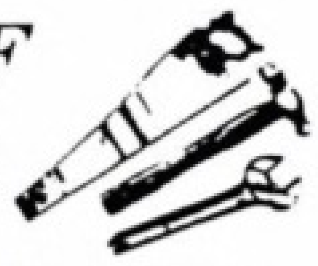

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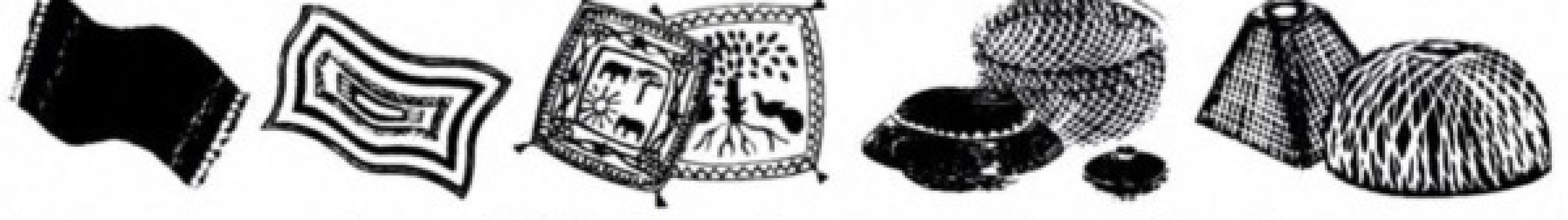

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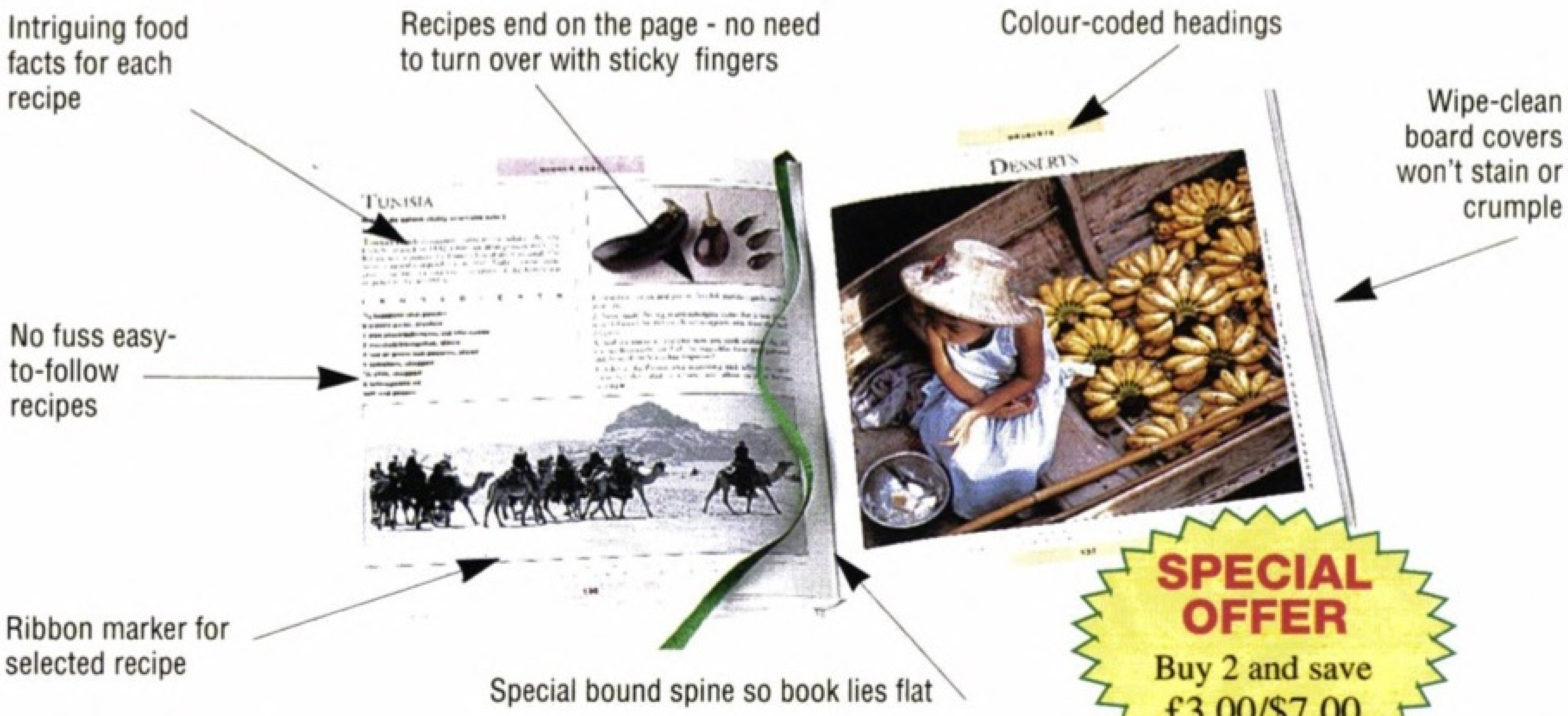
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